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THE CULTURES OF POSSIBILITY
POLITICS AND EMANCIPATION IN GEORGE ORWELL, E.P.
THOMPSON AND RAYMOND WILLIAMS

TESIS DOCTORAL

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A mis padres.

And to David Musselwhite, in memoriam.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART ONE	
GEORGE ORWELL: REVOLUTION AND REFORM.....	9
1. WIGAN PIER AND THE ROAD TO SOCIALISM.....	10
2. IMAGINING THE REVOLUTION.....	30
3. SOCIALISM AND THE TOTALITARIAN ABYSS.....	77
PART TWO	
E.P. THOMPSON: HISTORY AND HUMANISM.....	102
1. COMMUNISM WITH A BRITISH FACE: POLITICS, HISTORY AND CULTURE.....	103
2. THE MAKING OF ENGLISH SOCIALIST HUMANISM.....	129
3. HISTORY, UTOPIA AND THE LIMITS OF THEORY.....	156
4. HUMANISM REVISITED: ANTINOMIANS AND ALIENS IN THOMPSON'S LATER WORK.....	180
PART THREE	
RAYMOND WILLIAMS: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY.....	201
1. AN ORDINARY PROCESS: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE.....	202
2. <i>THE LONG REVOLUTION</i> : HISTORY, COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT.....	238

3. TOWARDS CULTURAL MATERIALISM.....	256
4. THE RETURN(S) OF COMMUNITY: CLASS, NATION, AND “THE DESIRE CALLED UTOPIA”.....	278
CONCLUSION.....	300
RESUMEN Y CONCLUSIONES EN ESPAÑOL.....	308
REFERENCE MATTER.....	323

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These are the real grounds of hope. It is by working and living together, with some real place and common interest to identify with, and as free as may be from external ideological definitions, whether divisive or universalist, that real social identities are formed.

Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*

Ma conception de l'universel est celle d'un universel riche de tout le particulier, riche de tous les particuliers, approfondissement et coexistence de tous les particuliers.

Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*

Introduction

This dissertation is an attempt to compare three British projects of radical social imagination temporally inscribed between the critical economic and political conjuncture of the mid to late 1930s and the consolidation of Thatcherism in the 1980s. My principal aim is to reconstruct the connections and continuities of three differentiated political, historical and personal articulations of the concept “Socialism”, and to vindicate a common ascription to the anti-deterministic logic of alternatives and possibilities which ultimately singles all three projects out as “dissident”, “anti-authoritarian” and even “libertarian”.

In each case, this task imposes a fundamental confrontation and analysis of the doctrinal contexts and broader political circumstances in which these authors are rooted. It also demands a basic problematisation of their canonical and generic areas of definition (as “literature”, “history”, “criticism”, “theory” etc.) in a conscious effort to dissolve the *post hoc* boundaries and epistemic categories which threaten to distort the precise contextual geometry of their interventions.

This is therefore an *interdisciplinary* comparative assessment of Orwell, Thompson and Williams’ radical political programmes under the common terminological denominator of “Socialism”. As a result, the particular orientation of each author’s treatment is conditioned by this shared pursuit and necessarily leaves out (except when the contextual imperative requires otherwise) those aspects (fundamental, no doubt, to any exhaustive characterisation of their respective intellectual

contributions) which do not directly inform the individual voice and imaginary of an oppositional or alternative project of social organisation. Even within these limits, however, the survey may seem incomplete. Notable areas of silence can certainly be pointed up which no thematic or methodological criterion *necessarily* imposes. Thus, for example, one could mention the strategic importance of Orwell's anti-imperialist ideas (first crystallised in his novel *Burmese Days*), as they come to shape and define his more explicitly socialist outlook. Similarly, Williams' writings on drama (and even his own, authored, plays), which are not considered here, both define and expand the range of his political references. A further silence may be detected in Williams' ground-breaking work on the media (especially on television), as well as in his earliest intellectual productions (of the Forties and early Fifties). Likewise my discussion of Thompson leaves out his extended analyses – beyond *The Making of the English Working Class* and its related texts – of the eighteenth century.

This is, in any case, a *representative* selection of moments, arguments and emphases within the respective “problem-spaces” of these authors. And it is my belief that the selectivity which they entail may nevertheless come across as integral to and consistent with the articulation of a unitary problematic.

This unity is offered according to a tripartite organisation. I have selected three sets of binary labels which, however reductive (or overly indeterminate and hence sprawling) in semantic scope, summarise the thematic specificities of each author's position. Needless to say, the programmatic – theoretical and even temperamental – emphases often overlap, suggesting a schematism which in no way exhausts the political imaginaries rehearsed by each of them.

Thus the first section, which deals with Orwell's political evolution from the moment of his encounter with the dire "condition" of industrial capitalism in the North of England, through a concrete definition of his revolutionary socialist vision in Spain, to a final (and more tentative than often acknowledged) compromise with British social democracy, is headed by the signpost "Revolution and Reform".

The second section, devoted to E.P. Thompson in the context of Communist dissidence in Britain, opens under the banner of "History and Humanism". Thus, while the stress appears to fall (as indeed it often does throughout the presentation) on Thompson's interlacing of a particular epistemology of historical inquiry with the specific political aims of his "socialist humanist" revision of the Communist tradition, this does not detract from an obvious commitment to "revolutionary" change in a sense which connects with and extends (into the contexts of the 1950s and beyond) Orwell's preoccupations with anti-authoritarian egalitarianism and socialist renewal.

The third and final section deals with the prominent thematisation of "culture" within Williams' *oeuvre* both as a crucial scientific object in its own right and as a projective articulation of a specifically social problematic within capitalism. For Williams, "community" is an operative concept which, despite ongoing problematisations and changes in critical status, appears to condense the main lines of development of a totalising vision of struggle and social transformation. In spite of the obvious evolution which his thinking undergoes over the three decades under examination (from around 1958 until his death in 1988), and despite the varying emphases subsequently accorded to his focal terms and concepts, the section preserves a nominal selectivity in its general thematisation of "Culture and Community".

A conceptual force-field which almost inevitably imposes itself in any discussion of radical social imagination is that governed by the term “utopia”. Its multiple and often incompatible theorisations have nevertheless converged upon a substantial commitment to the “othering” possibilities inscribed in the imagination of interpersonal arrangements (whether these possibilities are of a narrative, philosophical or anthropological kind). A common feature of the definitions and projects found across the term’s intellectual history (from Thomas More to William Morris and from Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch to Fredric Jameson) is the ontological commitment to a radical disturbance of existing conditions and relations of power. Empirical history, however, especially in the wake of Stalinism and the Cold War has earmarked its ethical thrust with a narrow political referentiality. As Jameson argues, “‘utopian’ has come to be a code word on the left for socialism or communism; while on the right it has become synonymous with ‘totalitarianism’ or, in effect, with Stalinism.”¹ Jameson has nevertheless insisted that, under conditions of “late capitalism” (the term he borrows from Ernest Mandel to characterise contemporary developments in the mode of production):² “[t]he Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.”³

¹ Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia” *New Left Review* II, 25 (January-February 2004), 35. The single most important recent contribution to the field of utopian studies is arguably Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005). For a seminal survey of the field, see Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); see also Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986) and Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia* (London: Hutchinson Educ., 1982)

² Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1999 [1972]); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

³ Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 232

Thus, while the utopian form may offer a viable alternative for an advanced postmodern conjuncture, it is more dubious whether a description in terms of utopianism thus understood may thoroughly clarify the contexts and contents of dissident British Socialism between the late 1930s and the onset of Thatcherism. For indeed, as Jameson himself remarks, “[t]he very political weakness of Utopia in previous generations – namely that it furnished nothing like an account of agency, nor did it have a coherent historical and practical-political picture of transition – now becomes a strength in a situation in which neither of these problems seems currently to offer candidates for a solution.”⁴

This weakness becomes apparent in the always vexed and controversial reading of Orwell’s “dystopian” or “anti-utopian” classics, for example. As Andrew Milner has argued, *contra* Jameson, the reduction of Orwell’s political problematic to Cold War-influenced terms of utopia/anti-utopia (reinforcing the impression that Orwell’s loyalties lie, unproblematically, with the liberal-capitalist end of the spectrum) leaves out an experiential wealth which, properly analysed, would effectively confute any simplistic rendition of the polarity with which Jameson seeks to align himself (anti-communism vs anti-anti-communism). What is lacking in the “utopian/anti-utopian” account offered by Jameson is, precisely, the dimension of agency which articulates the plurality of voices and emphases of the present project. As we will see, the terms “experience” and “agency”, albeit complex and often diffuse on their own, nevertheless manage to capture the conjunctural singularity of particular histories whilst entertaining an ontological commitment to the “othering” of social reality – or, as Jameson puts it, to “the break”.

⁴ Jameson, *ibid.*, 232

Thus Orwell's engagement with the abysmal sites of the Great Depression lays down a basic framework for the practical development of the idea of experience that his subsequent works (after his participation in the Spanish Civil War) will flesh out. The physical immediacy of capitalist-induced destitution supplies a starting-point, an initial configuration of the class society which will then enable the writer's transition to "consciousness" and to the subsequent discriminations of his emancipatory project.

The political outlook bestowed by the events in Catalonia signifies a marked advance in his idiosyncratic understanding and formulation of a workable Socialism in the context of the 1930s. In particular, the encounter with a fledgling totalitarian deviation from the blanket definitions of his early radicalism establishes a precise framework of counter-hegemonic imagination. The concrete history of his loyalties – the direct involvement with the POUM militia and the British ILP, with the Home Guard and the "vision" of an English Socialist Revolution, and finally his assumption of a "compromise" of sorts before the totalitarian menace – offers an irreducible matrix of idiosyncratic potentialities, all of them equipped with a clear definition of historical agency and a precise instantiation of the "break" with hegemonic power relations.

This outlook is utopian, in the sense of offering an imaginative scenario of the systemic break, but it is also processual and agential in a way that reaches beyond the functional possibilities of utopia (according to Jameson's account), opening up its ontology to a far more extensive range of possibilities.

Similarly, the "conjuncture" of dissident Communism in Britain as developed in the early years of the Cold War and, especially, as marked by the dramatic turning-point of 1956, offers a productive matrix of oppositional imagination which is not contained within the institutional boundaries of a singular political project. On the contrary, the

multiplicity which asserts itself in the work of, for example, the Communist Party Historians' Group, and in particular in the anti-authoritarian initiatives of an author like Edward Thompson, opens up an "illimitable" range of connections and opportunities for an inventive and anti-essentialist re-articulation of Socialism.

Thus, Thompson's work on the formation of the English working class, on the antinomian identity in English Protestantism, on the "utopian" Socialism of William Morris as well as his more public commitments to the regeneration of the British Communist movement and against the "exterminist" logic of the Cold War, represent irreducible instances of a vocal political determination to re-create the conditions of common (social) life in open defiance, not only of the "bourgeois idea of society", but also of the more sclerotic tendencies within the contemporary Left.

Finally, the intellectual project of Raymond Williams supplies a benchmark and ineluctable reference-point for any assessment of the triumphs and failures of the post-war project(s) of British Socialism. In particular, his extended engagement with the field of "culture" represents a central moment of coordination for instincts, ideas and sentiments that pervade the work of both Orwell and Thompson. These authors' central preoccupation with notions of social equality and freedom from dogmatic guidance thus find in Williams a coordinated expression and strategic disposition under the aegis of "community" and in the intense and emotionally charged "localisation" of general concerns about social and collective arrangements and about the inherent possibilities of oppositional agency. Lawrence Grossberg has recently argued that:

If we are to find new ways of (re-)constituting the multiple presents as contexts of hope... we have to learn to 'hear that which one does not already understand'... This may reveal new ways to connect to the

multiplicity not only of disabling and pessimistic realities, but also of hopes, dreams and desires, and seek to define a new and collective project of reinventing the ‘possibilities’ of imagination and the ways of being modern.⁵

What this dissertation proposes to do is to isolate three instances, three “moments” of an alternative constitution of possibility within the seemingly exhausted conjuncture of British Socialism. The contention is that, far from revealing a monolithic or trite ritualisation of hackneyed and failed slogans derived from one particular stock of what Grossberg calls “Euro-modernity”, the tonal and contextual variations of our three authors manage to extract, from within a relatively well-known narrative of emancipatory thought, a measure of particularity – of “that which one does not already understand” – which cannot be reduced to a preconceived generality.

What is being argued, then, is that no monological inscription of emancipatory hope can dispense with the local richness of particular histories, of conjunctures and circumstances. The common denominator of our three authors is thus, primarily, an unwillingness to relinquish the heightened sense of contextuality of their political declensions – an insistence on the relevance of “directly lived” forms of resistance and oppositionality (as much as of redeemed, alternative worlds) to a general cause of human emancipation. For indeed the notion that possibility is fleshed out in the particular combinations of social identity becomes something of a *leitmotif* in the political imagination of Orwell, Thompson and Williams. And social identity, as their different situations articulate it, is inseparable from a rooted sense of lived history, from a precise and intensely collective “experience” of struggle and creation.

⁵ Lawrence Grossberg, “Raymond Williams and the absent modernity”, in Monika Seidl, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *About Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 2010), 32-33

PART ONE

GEORGE ORWELL: REVOLUTION AND REFORM

1. Wigan Pier and the Road to Socialism

The people lived almost entirely by instinct, men of my father's age could not really read. And the pit did not mechanize men. On the contrary. Under the butty system, the miners worked underground as a sort of intimate community, they knew each other practically naked, and with curious close intimacy, and the darkness and the underground remoteness of the pit "stall", and the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive, and intuitional contact between men very highly developed, a contact almost as close as touch, very real and very powerful. This physical awareness and intimate *togetherness* was at its strongest down pit. When the men came up into the light, they blinked. They had, in a measure, to change their flow. Nevertheless, they brought with them above ground the curious dark intimacy of the mine, the naked sort of contact...¹

Writing in "Nottingham and the Mining Country" about childhood memories of the native country, D.H. Lawrence rescues a powerful image of community, of organic linkage between fellow workers and their social world, projecting beyond the barren human landscape of 1930s Britain an alternative vision of social integration. The intimate affectivity of the vision emphasises a direct physical continuity of bodies, miners' bodies, carrying the symbolic burden of a combined exposure to the cruder

¹ D.H. Lawrence, "Nottingham and the Mining Country", in *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), 117

depredations of industrial capitalism and a deep, instinctual homosociality fundamentally antagonistic to the cunning rationalities of modern political and economic forms.

Lawrence's image of mutuality is indeed closer to Burke's depiction of the foregone "age of chivalry", of its mores and rules of social intercourse, than it is to the contemporaneous discourse of Socialism or Labourism. In effect, his miners' underground community rehearses – in Burke's words – "that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom."²

"The colliers – writes Lawrence – were deeply alive, instinctively. But they had no daytime ambition, and no daytime intellect. They avoided, really, the rational aspect of life. They preferred to take life instinctively and intuitively."³ The elemental immediacy of this existence harbours no discursive or (in Lawrence's words) "materialistic" concern – just the sheer immanence of homosocial affectivity, the sheer *life* of labouring and communing bodies. The irrepressibly utopian content of this pastoral image of industrial life – this idiosyncratic version of Lawrentian irrationalism –⁴ is precisely set against the "tragedy of ugliness" which defined the "Age of Machinery" (as Carlyle had termed the nascent process of industrialisation):⁵

The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 170

³ Lawrence, *ibid.*, 118

⁴ Which must, in this context, necessarily acquire the oppositional dimension of a challenge to industrial and utilitarian processes of capitalist "rationalisation". See, for example, Simon Casey, *Naked Liberty and the World of Desire: Elements of Anarchism in the Work of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Routledge, 2003), Anne Fernihough, *D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

⁵ See Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times", in *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1971)

surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers.⁶

Orwell's documentary analysis of poverty and unemployment in the first half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* brought Lawrence's indictment of modern ugliness to bear on the particular realities of moral and physical dereliction induced by the economic slump of the 1930s. Orwell's depiction of the human landscape generated by the Depression in the North of England is directly influenced by a conceptual sequence (rehearsed throughout the Romantic tradition in its classic criticism of Industrialisation) which causally relates the "civilising" logic of capitalist rationality and its attendant discourse on "progress" to a grim offshoot or by-product of material ruin and spiritual decay.

The Road to Wigan Pier thus opens with a glimpse of degraded working-class life, a dramatic foray into the darker recesses of modern society rather than with the relatively triumphalist description of coalmining. The Brookers' lodging house is a condensed repository of degradation; a paradigmatic negation of the principles and values of community and organic belonging hypostasised by Lawrence. Neither *Gemeinschaft* nor *Gesellschaft*,⁷ the world inhabited by the Brookers and their like is a lumping together of miseries and humiliations – a voiding of humanity branded with the logic of class stratification:

On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me. It was not only

⁶ Lawrence, *ibid.*, 120

⁷ In the terminology popularized by Ferdinand Tönnies. These are often translated as "community" and "society", respectively. See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 2002 [1887])

the dirt, the smells and the vile food, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like black beetles, in an endless muddle of slovened jobs and mean grievances. The most dreadful thing about people like the Brookers is the way they say the same things over and over again. It gives you the feeling that they are not real people at all, but a kind of ghost for ever rehearsing the same futile rigmarole... But it is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You cannot disregard them if you accept the civilisation which produced them. For this is part at least of what industrialism has done for us.⁸

The material and moral penury of a particularly degraded example of working-class life is thus inextricable from the “civilising project” of modernity. There is an inescapable consubstantiality and continuity between capitalistic rationality and the local embodiments of its systemic failure. This makes the acknowledgment of poverty, its close analysis and experiencing, not only requisite for the doctrinal observer – for the socialist in the making – as part of a process of ideological development, but rather, a general ethical mandate with consequences for all: “[i]t is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist.”⁹

⁸ George Orwell, “The Road to Wigan Pier”, in *Orwell’s England* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1937]), 66

⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 66

The bid for an organic reconstitution of social life away from the bracing dereliction of modern industrial “civilisation”, which has been pointed out as a central element of Orwell’s programme (as, for example, in Richard Hoggart’s suggestion that Orwell “wanted to belong to a coherent society, [that] he longed for a sense of communion.”),¹⁰ is predicated on a contrasting pattern of working-class reality which is closely associated, as in Lawrence, with the archetypal masculinity of miners.

Orwell’s depiction of mining in the Northern districts supposes a radical shift in tone and emphasis from the bleakness and inertia of a self-defeating working class overly exposed to the worse dynamics of an internalised subalternity, to the proud proletarian identity of the mining communities. The dynamics of homosociality emphasised by Lawrence give way in Orwell to a detailed (and yet equally scopophilic) description of underground work. The mine becomes a heroic space – in sharp contrast with the vile domesticity of the Brookers’ house – in which the well-nigh superhuman powers of the miners meet and defy the internal limit of productive rationality. Coalmining supplies the emblem of a native resistance which tips the balance against a blanket projection of the working-class condition as deprived and debased. This emblematic position is, as Beatrix Campbell has pointed out, the product of a characteristic identification, in the critique of industrialism, between oppositionality and the mystique of masculinity: “[t]he socialist movement in Britain – and we could add: the broad range of anti-industrialist discourses, not only on the left – has been swept off its feet by the magic of masculinity, muscle and machinery. And in its star system, the accolades go to the miners.”¹¹

¹⁰ Richard Hoggart, “Introduction to *The Road to Wigan Pier*”, in Raymond Williams (ed.), *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), 38

¹¹ Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s* (London: Virago, 1984) Indeed, there is little doubt, as Campbell points out, that the solid sense of community associated with

The miner stands out, in the loaded iconography of labouring figures and working-class idols, as a structural pivot commanding symbolic authority and attracting the unflinching adherence of a fetishistic discourse made by and for men. Orwell's characteristic definition of the coal miner as "a sort of grimy caryatid upon whose shoulders nearly everything that is *not* grimy is supported" encapsulates this fundamental equation between an idealised incarnation of Work – as the real sustenance upon which the capitalist machine is propped – and an essential notion of masculinity.¹² According to Rob Breton: "[i]n its physicality, its demand for total engagement, its social usefulness, its community, its demand for 'manly' strength, its direct involvement with the land and solid materials, and in the image of self-realization it confirms, mining encapsulates nonrationalized Work, an idea Orwell isolates and protects".¹³

[T]he fillers look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron – hammered iron statues – under the smooth coat of coal dust which clings to them from head to foot. It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realise what splendid men they are. Most of them are small (big men are at a disadvantage in that job) but nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs, with no one ounce of waste flesh anywhere.¹⁴

This eroticisation of the labour-force, taken or cast at its most primary or elemental – as sheer corporeality –, paradoxically overturns the symbolic position initially assigned to the worker within the social organisation of labour. By hypostasising and fetishising the

miners is consistently based on the exclusion of women from its central dynamic, "because women's presence would dissolve the symmetry between men's work and masculinity", Campbell, *ibid.*, 98

¹² Orwell, *ibid.*, 68

¹³ Rob Breton, *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 161

¹⁴ Orwell, *ibid.*, 69

sterling physicality of these Nietzschean *Übermenschen* of modern industrialism, their enforced position in the system (their objective ‘nature’ as cogs in a complex machinery) is undercut and ultimately replaced by a figure of immanence and self-referentiality for which no external – mechanistic, functional or systemic– use can be prescribed.

Orwell’s libidinal engagement with the archetypes of industrial civilisation is counterbalanced, in the remaining sections of the first half of the book, with substantial documentary mapping of the actual conditions endured by many of these iconic representatives of working-class life. Thus the cruder effects of the crisis are contextualised in a particular devastation of the very foundations of “civilisation”.¹⁵

The second half of the book analyses the facts of class which made his integration with the working-class communities of the North an ultimately failed project. As Ben Clarke has pointed out, despite “his admiration for the working class, Orwell is simply ‘not one of them’, just as he equally simply is ‘a bourgeois’”. The complex network of practices and values that defines the communities he visits prevents his integration. It also undermines his position as a social explorer.”¹⁶ The highly idiosyncratic and opinionated quality of this section of *The Road* would eventually earn Orwell the unqualified ire and contempt of broad sectors of the British Left.¹⁷ Most tellingly, it caused the book to be published with an editorial note by Victor Gollancz in

¹⁵ Bernard Schweizer, *Radicals on the Road: the Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 28

¹⁶ Ben Clarke, *Orwell in Context: Communities, Myths, Values* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 59

¹⁷ As Ben Jackson has noted, the “critique of Orwell’s definition of socialism became a minor industry”, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2007), 98. See also Harold Laski, “Review of *The Road to Wigan Pier*”, *Left News* (March 1937), 275-6; Harry Pollitt, “Mr Orwell will have to try again”, *Daily Worker* (17 March 1937), 7; John Lewis “Ex-public school, ex-university” and “Forward from Wigan Pier”, *Left News* (May 1937), 379-80

which he expressed, on behalf of the Left Book Club, his disagreement with Orwell's conclusions.

Orwell begins by delineating a personal trajectory of conversion to the socialist cause, examining the whys and wherefores of his decision to "see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters." "This – writes Orwell – was necessary to me as part of my approach to Socialism".¹⁸ Orwell conceives his "descent" into the northern "abyss" of proletarian England as a fundamental and ineluctable step in the process of political development which had first seen him break with British imperialism in Burma and then experience the "down and out" life of a tramp in the urban underworlds of London and Paris. However, the project involved in his exploration of the northern working class signalled a qualitative leap, a change of moral substance which explicitly postulated Socialism – however embryonically or instinctively conceived – as the precise horizon of political achievement against which concrete realities and limitations were to be judged.

His reflection commences with a cross-examination of English class realities and, in particular, with the difficult topography of middle class distinctions and prejudices. Thus, he famously characterises his own background as "lower-upper-middle-class" – a particular stratum or "sub-caste" within an intricate series of bourgeois layers. Orwell emphasises in this respect that, however useful the economic determination may appear in terms of establishing the identity of a particular individual or family within the accepted divisions, "the essential point about the English class-system is that it is *not* entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a

¹⁸ Orwell, *ibid.*, 140

money stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts.”¹⁹

Orwell explains the virulence of much upper-middle-class prejudice (of the sort he himself had imbibed during his formative years and from which his socialist conversion was to mark the final break) as a particular ideological function of the often crude material differences between the various bourgeois rungs. The common denominator of these groups was a firm prejudice and an ingrained snobbishness directed against the working classes. However, the lower strata within them, the “shabby genteel” and generally impoverished middle classes played a specific role in the defence and upkeep of the bourgeois ideological fortress. These “down-at-heel” members of the class were in that sense “the shock-absorbers of the bourgeoisie”:

The real bourgeoisie, those in the £2,000 a year class and over, have their money as a thick layer of padding between themselves and the class they plunder; in so far as they are aware of the Lower Orders at all they are aware of them as employees, servants and tradesmen. But it is quite different for the poor devils lower down who are struggling to live genteel lives on what are virtually working-class incomes. These last are forced into close and, in a sense, intimate contact with the working class, and I suspect it is from them that the traditional upper-class attitude towards ‘common’ people is derived.²⁰

The most basic aspect of the general characterisation and screening of the working classes operated by the bourgeois mentality is also the most irrational and hard to eradicate. This is the belief, from which a middle-class upbringing is indissoluble, that

¹⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 140

²⁰ Orwell, *ibid.*, 141

“the lower classes smell”: “[t]hat was what we were taught – *the lower classes smell*. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical* feeling”.²¹ The rooting of prejudice in a fact of sheer physicality thus creates a chasmic antagonism, which even the best of one’s intellectual efforts and deep-seated political convictions can do little to unsettle. Orwell insists on the extraordinary resilience of habits, manners and prejudices acquired in the early stages of a middle-class upbringing. His point is that the former are fundamentally inseparable from the latter, and so, that the instinctive badges of class identity – however trivial they may appear – actually betray a fundamental assumption of superiority and continue to shape, even beyond the nurturing ground of a middle-class background, the individual’s unconscious allegiances:

Perhaps table-manners are not a bad test of sincerity. I have known numbers of bourgeois Socialists, I have listened by the hour to their tirades against their own class, and yet never, not even once, have I met one who had picked up proletarian table-manners. Yet, after all, why not? Why should a man who thinks all virtue resides in the proletariat still take such pains to drink his soup silently? It can only be because in his heart he feels that proletarian manners are disgusting. So you see he is still responding to the training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class.²²

The specific resistances induced by this early training in prejudice make any genuine attempt to transcend the class differential – in substance and not merely in appearance – a genuine personal struggle which the aspiring middle-class socialist must

²¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 144

²² Orwell, *ibid.*, 150

necessarily confront. Orwell locates the roots of his own struggle in the acute experience of oppression with which he had been acquainted in Burma. The bitterness and injustice generated by five years in the British Imperial Police were to issue in a sense of self-estrangement and in a radical urge to “get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants”:

It was in this way that my thoughts turned towards the English working class. It was the first time that I had ever been really aware of the working class, and to begin with it was only because they supplied an analogy. They were the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma.²³

This fundamentally immature desire to mingle with the despised “others” of a markedly blinkered class ideology took the form, in these early years of reaction against the inherent outlook of his bourgeois background, of an “extreme” and yet still “unconscious” courting of underclass life: Orwell’s strenuous efforts to “go native” among London tramps are marked by a crucial overcoming of the physical scruple which he relates to a middle-class upbringing.²⁴ This preliminary step will only acquire retroactive value with the securing of an enlightened position vis-à-vis the structural causes of class division; that is, with the assumption of an explicitly socialist programme of action.

Orwell’s central emphasis and injunction in the second part of *The Road* is precisely the need to reconcile political vision with a real acknowledgement of deep-seated class instincts, and thus ultimately, to consciously undertake the difficult road beyond class not by circumventing its facts – and real blocks to action – but by limiting

²³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 158

²⁴ George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Penguin, 2001)

and reducing their relevance to effective socialist transformation. In this perspective, many good-willing attempts to “break” class barriers by enacting facetious scenarios of communal sharing which tend to ignore the radical embeddedness of prejudice and separation are fundamentally flawed:

All such deliberate, conscious efforts at class-breaking are, I am convinced, a very serious mistake. Sometimes they are merely futile, but where they do show a definite result it is usually to *intensify* class-prejudice... You have forced the pace and set up an uneasy, unnatural equality between class and class; the resultant friction brings to the surface all kinds of feelings that might otherwise have remained buried, perhaps for ever.²⁵

The opposite temptation to demonise the bourgeoisie from a supposedly advanced proletarian position – one claiming to have “seen through” the bankruptcy of bourgeois values and culture as a whole – is, according to Orwell, a parallel source of estrangement and a further obstacle to the necessary creation of inter-class socialist alliances. This hostile and reductionistic approach, which Orwell associates with “the younger Communist writers” and the *Left Review* – generates a further dislocation of the real challenges and aims in the attempt to surpass the class divide. In that sense:

The only sensible procedure is to go slow and not force the pace. If you secretly think of yourself as a gentleman and as such the superior of the greengrocer’s errand boy, it is far better to say so than to tell lies about it. Ultimately you have got to drop your snobbishness, but it is fatal to pretend to drop it before you are really ready to do so.²⁶

²⁵ Orwell, “The Road to Wigan Pier”, 168

²⁶ Orwell, *ibid.*, 172

The road to Socialism, as Orwell explicated it in the pre-revolutionary – that is, pre-Spanish Civil War – approach of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, is thus a hazardous and meandering road around ingrained conceptions and prejudices (around “ideologies”) with the distinctive, and all too real threat of Fascism lurking in the background. The parlous state of the movement, both nationally and internationally, prompts a critical reconsideration of both its material underpinnings (the class divide and the set of ideological responses it generates) and its doctrinal components. This particular turn in Orwell’s argument is by far the most controversial and symptomatic of what, at this stage in his political development, can only be characterised as the preliminary phase of his Socialism. The basic identification of its doctrinal core is thus a commonsensical acknowledgement of egalitarianism and mutuality in a time of dire inequalities and social fragmentation: “the idea that we must all co-operate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions, seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system”.²⁷ And yet, “the fact that we have got to face is that Socialism is *not* establishing itself. Instead of going forward, the cause of Socialism is visibly going back. At this moment Socialists almost everywhere are in retreat before the onslaught of Fascism, and events are moving at terrible speed”.²⁸ The root-cause of this retreat must therefore be sought out, at least partially, in the specific imaginaries invoked by Socialists, in the established outlook of a theory of social praxis that “in the form in which it is now presented to us, has about it something inherently distasteful – something that drives away the very people who ought to be flocking to its support”.²⁹

²⁷ Orwell, *ibid.*, 173

²⁸ Orwell, *ibid.*, 174

²⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 174

Orwell polemically associates this repulsive kernel of the theory with the specific theoretical reflexes of orthodox Marxism (or even Marxism *tout court*). In establishing this long-standing, and often problematical, association (which will remain largely unrevised throughout his subsequent work), Orwell centrally targets some of the more obtuse pronouncements of a simplistic teleological vision welded to assumptions of “historic necessity” and the inexorability of Socialism itself.³⁰ The very occurrence of Fascism as a novel, determining force in the balance of political loyalties appears to confirm the failure of any such “iron laws” of historical prognostication.

Orwell’s counter-intuitive method is to expose the limitations of the anti-socialist view by proceeding from within, that is, by charting the sources and logical steps followed by “the ordinary objector to Socialism.” The first observable fact in any close study of existing Socialism is that, “in its developed form [it] is a theory confined entirely to the middle class.” Thus, its prime adherents – at least in the English context with which Orwell is here concerned – are not working-class individuals with organic links to the industrial areas, but essentially bourgeois elements with a tendency to cut themselves off from any real sense of “common humanity”. The identification of Socialists with “cranks” (that is, with “every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England”) engenders an automatic reaction of hostility in the “ordinary man”.³¹ This is with little doubt, as has been abundantly observed, Orwell at his most parochial and prejudiced.³² Yet the reductionism (and chauvinism) of particular insights is inseparable from the main outline of the argument and its outstanding points. Thus the widening gulf between

³⁰ This criticism, from a radically different perspective, was also formulated by a declared Marxist thinker such as Walter Benjamin. His devastating critique of teleological “historicism” pervades his important “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in which the vulgar conception of historical evolution encountered in linear interpretations of Marxism is berated for its negation of the complex temporality of historical emancipation. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 253-264

³¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 175

³² See, for example, Hoggart, *ibid.*, 38

middle-class Socialism and what Orwell identifies as the commonsensical average is a function of the actual distance, in manner, idiom and worldview, between their doctrine itself and the experiential horizon of the proletariat. This is especially true of the Fabian variety of socialist theory or the jargon-filled orthodox Marxist discourse “which, even when it is not openly written *de haut en bas*, is always completely removed from the working class in idiom and manner of thought. The Coles, Webbs, Stracheys, etc., are not *exactly* proletarian writers”.³³ Orwell’s claim is that the fine textures of orthodoxy and theory are essentially removed from the practical experience and immediate political imagination of working people:

To the ordinary working man, the sort you would meet in any pub on Saturday night, Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about. To the more revolutionary type, the type who is a hunger-marcher and is blacklisted by employers, the word is a sort of rallying-cry against the forces of oppression, a vague threat of future violence. But, so far as my experience goes, no genuine working man grasps the implications of Socialism. Often, in my opinion, he is a truer Socialist than the orthodox Marxist, because he does remember, what the other so often forgets, that Socialism means justice and common decency.³⁴

In this alignment of the doctrine with a fundamentally bourgeois experience of political action, and in the resulting recognition of a basic rift between the theory and its avowed collective subject – the proletariat –, Orwell approximates a relatively widespread interpretation of working-class attitudes towards Socialism.³⁵ Critical stances directed against middle-class dirigisme within the ranks of British Socialism

³³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 176

³⁴ Orwell, *ibid.*, 177

³⁵ Gary Day, *Class* (London: Routledge, 2001), 168

were not infrequent in the interwar period. Ellen Wilkinson's 1929 novel *Clash* and Harold Heslop's *The Gate of a Strange Field*, offer a characteristic response to the Fabian-inspired, top-down logic of social transformation.³⁶ Wilkinson was particularly vocal about class determinations of political action and about the discrepant loyalties these generated. Her portrayal of working-class labour heroine Joan Craig provides the narrative cover for, and exploration of, the attempted and ultimately failed encounter between the "enlightened" world of a London middle-class intelligentsia with a "committed" outlook and the relatively backward world of northern labour activism.³⁷ The total effect of this representation is indubitably one of frustrated alliance: a recognition of the latent incompatibility between extant bourgeois loyalties and a purely rhetorical solidarity with the working class.³⁸ Wilkinson opts for class retrenchment, calling at the same time for a sincere break with middle-class values and resistances.

Orwell's position, though less expedient about the necessary passage beyond middle-class ideological boundaries, is largely coincidental with Wilkinson's criticism of the "high-minded Socialist slum-visitor": "[t]he truth is that to many people, calling themselves Socialists, revolution does not mean a movement of the masses with which

³⁶ Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working Class Novel, 1890-1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994)

³⁷ Roberto del Valle Alcalá, "En-Gendering the Clash: Ellen Wilkinson and Interwar Socialist Feminism", *Philologia*, 7 (2009), 127-134

³⁸ More recently and in a different context, Ross McKibbin has drawn a parallel between particular expressions of working-class identity and effective reactions of hostility towards received discourses of radical social transformation. In his analysis, "class consciousness is a term which... describes attitudes which are defensive, negative or apolitical. A class conscious stance thus becomes one of working-class suspicion of middle-class men and women arising out of a belief in the fundamental incompatibility of the ideas and politics of men who do not share the same life experiences or the same way of earning a living, whether or not they are your allies or ostensible partners in the labour movement.", J.M. Winter, quoted in Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 294-295

they hope to associate themselves; it means a set of reforms which ‘we’, the clever ones, are going to impose upon ‘them’, the Lower Orders.”³⁹

One of the more palpable effects of this estrangement of Socialists from common feeling and sensibility is, according to Orwell, the blanket rejection to which the movement *as a whole* is often condemned by people who could, at least potentially, sympathise with “the *essential* aim of Socialism.” This induced alienation cannot be accounted for in a mechanistically materialist way, as is often the case in the standard (vulgar) Marxist analysis. Thus the grim spectacle of 1930s left-wing politics, as Orwell interprets it in the English context, is one marked by a general disconnection between projected aims (which are regarded as largely compatible with a numerical majority of the population) and particular stylistic and intellectual modes of presentation and explanation.

Amongst the ominous consequences of this fundamental breakdown, the rise of Fascism as a compensatory strategy indirectly capitalising on Socialists’ incapacity to make their case and to generally empathise with popular demands, stands out as the most symptomatic development of the period. In the popular reaction against Socialism – grounded in a “commonsensical” hostility towards “prigs” –,⁴⁰ Orwell identifies a fundamental aversion to mechanisation. Thus the “Socialist world is always pictured as a completely mechanised, immensely organised world, depending on the machine as the civilisations of antiquity depended on the slave”.⁴¹ This unquestioning complicity and even co-extensiveness of Socialism with technological dominance becomes a serious

³⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 179-180. See Peter Beilharz, *Labour’s Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1992), A.M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1962)

⁴⁰ “The ordinary man may not flinch from a dictatorship of the proletariat, if you offer it tactfully; offer him a dictatorship of the prigs, and he gets ready to fight”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 182

⁴¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 185

limitation as soon as the mechanical aspect is no longer “merely regarded as a necessary development but as an end in itself, almost as a kind of religion”:

All the work that is now done by hand will then be done by machinery: everything that is now made of leather, wood or stone will be made of rubber, glass or steel; there will be no disorder, no loose ends, no wildernesses, no wild animals, no weeds, no disease, no poverty, no pain – and so on and so forth. The Socialist world is to be above all things an *ordered* world, an *efficient* world. But it is precisely from that vision of the future as a sort of glittering Wells-world that sensitive minds recoil. Please notice that this essentially fat-bellied version of ‘progress’ is not an integral part of Socialist doctrine; but it has come to be thought of as one, with the result that the temperamental conservatism which is latent in all kinds of people is easily mobilised against Socialism.⁴²

The tenor of this analysis brings back the main emphases of the Romantic critique of industrialism. The unrelenting onslaught of the machine is the price of a bleary-eyed progressivism; and this price is to be paid in a brutal dismantling of the organic balances – the harmonious rhythms – of a pre-industrial society. Thomas Carlyle’s prophetic formulation of this characteristic stance of nineteenth-century conservatism also defined the discursive scope of its critical target and named it, evocatively, “the Age of Machinery” (an “epoch” of which 1930s Socialism as anatomised by Orwell, no doubt constituted – as Jacobinism and Chartism before it – a precise and organic function):

It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word;
the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and

⁴² Orwell, *ibid.*, 186

practises the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster... These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangement, for institutions, constitutions, – for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.⁴³

The consubstantiality of this structural dynamic of modern society and the accompanying forms of social organisation and political rule is, for Carlyle, indisputable. Indeed, “[n]owhere... is the deep, almost exclusive faith we have in Mechanism more visible than in the Politics of this time.” The radical adherence to “institutions, constitutions” and an associated progeny of “mechanical” exertions against that “subordination of the heart” which, according to Burke, “kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom,”⁴⁴ supplied further proof of an unstoppable drift towards “speedy anarchy”.⁴⁵ In a similar vein of interpretation, Orwell

⁴³ Carlyle, *ibid.*, 64, 67

⁴⁴ Burke, *ibid.*, 170

⁴⁵ This is the precise backdrop against which an abundance of “discrepancy” presided over by “a FRENCH REVOLUTION” must be countenanced: “[t]hese Chartisms, Radicalisms, Reform Bill, Tithe Bill... are *our* French Revolution”, Carlyle, *ibid.*, 181

credits the predominant form of Socialism of his contemporaries with an analogous projection: the endless mediations and “rationalisations” supposed by technology and machinery fundamentally deny the human element in creativity. With the social division of labour – which pulsates at the core of Orwell’s description of the industrial condition in which Socialism has its roots – comes the end of that unitary process of production in which the worker can directly relate to the outcome of her/his work – and in which work itself displays the lineaments of an organic and total process requiring, so to speak, an integral productive intelligence – a craft, rather than a dictated gesture or isolated operation in an impersonal series.⁴⁶ The boundless extensiveness of the mechanisation process leaves no exempted area, subjecting all and sundry to its logic and rituals: “[t]he machine would even encroach upon the activities we now class as ‘art’; it is doing so already, via the camera and the radio. Mechanise the world as fully as it might be mechanised, and whichever way you turn there will be some machine cutting you off from the chance of working – that is, of living”.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974)

⁴⁷ Orwell, *ibid.*, 192

2. Imagining the Revolution

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 offered a unique opportunity for the articulation of various political stances equipped with a concrete vision of radical social transformation. The broad ideological spectrum of anti-fascism, which had been gathering momentum since the beginning of the decade, was now granted the specificity of a geographically localised conflict endowed with an ominous reference to general developments in the international political arena.

The predicament of the Spanish Republic after the military uprising of July, which had initially commanded the sympathies of a broad anti-fascist audience internationally, in fact concealed a diversity of tensions and drives with varying revolutionary emphases within its own camp. The internal fragmentation of Republican Spain along antagonistic ideological lines both confutes the simplistic rendition customarily offered by Communist-influenced versions of the conflict (as a purely anti-fascist and pro-democratic struggle) and reveals a rich and complex flourishing of social utopianism.¹ Anarchist experiments in collectivisation (of the land and industries) represent the foremost advance of a spontaneous agenda which the military revolt itself had prompted and which had then served in many areas as the primary defensive bulwark against the coup's success.²

¹ This is what Tom Buchanan has named the "liberal interpretation" of the Civil War, upheld by many left-leaning intellectuals in Britain and elsewhere, and generally endorsed by the institutional Left: "[h]ere, they believed, was a democratically elected government, committed to reforming a backward society, that had been attacked by 'fascist' forces both from within and outside the country.", Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1997), 146

² The classic account of this process and its subsequent containment under Communist initiative is Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage* (1961), later revised and expanded as *The Spanish Revolution*:

Collectivisation and the creation of the militias were concrete wartime manifestations of the anarcho-syndicalist programme, which, as George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert have pointed out, by 1936, “had filtered down to even the least literate segments of society”.³ The sort of hegemony attained by anarchist ideas among broad sectors of the industrial proletariat (especially in Catalonia) and the propertyless peasantry (especially in Andalusia) secured a high degree of resilience and practical *élan* for the revolutionary experiment when the hour of its realisation arrived. This revolutionary vision was effectively rooted in a moral – and perhaps even millenarian – vision of radical social change.⁴ The practicalities of economic organisation, for example, were necessarily second to an overarching concern with the transformation of societal values: “[t]o create a society based on justice was their main goal; they had no interest in establishing competitive economic structures which only enriched the community materially”.⁵

The visionary outlook of the Spanish Revolution was inescapable, as was its sincere bid to break with a common past of perceived injustice in which the woeful trinity of church, state and capital had long featured as distinct and inseparable roots of a common oppression.⁶ The “vision” which the revolutionary outbreak had consigned to the streets in the summer of 1936 was to capture the attention of intellectuals of a radical inclination and sometimes even spur their belief in the feasibility of utopian social change. The case of George Orwell is both paradigmatic and highly idiosyncratic

The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979)

³ George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert, *Spain at War: the Spanish Civil War in Context 1931-1939* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 126

⁴ See Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963 [1937]) and Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1990 [1943])

⁵ Esenwein and Shubert, *ibid.*, 126

⁶ As the President of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, would later observe: “[i]n the early days of radiant optimism the minds of nearly all Spaniards were fired by a messianic goal. If, in the Nationalist camp, it was Christian civilization in the West they were saving, in the Republican camp the prophets proclaimed the birth of a new civilization. Terrible hyperboles that easily inflame what is visionary in the Spanish soul!”, quoted by Bolloten, *ibid.*, 61

in that his Spanish experience represents a turning point for a very personal quest and ideological trajectory (which would issue in “disillusionment”, according to the standard and yet highly problematical account of his subsequent political evolution), but also a characteristic opening and commitment to the possibilities of a concrete, unfolding, utopia. As confirmed by the often-quoted passage from a letter to Cyril Connolly, “I have seen wonderful things & at last really believe in Socialism, which I never did before”.⁷ The physical and moral immediacy of an unrestrained and explosive social experiment at work had effectively unleashed the promissory potential of a hitherto persuasive – but mostly untested – projection: the tentative Socialism of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

According to Alex Zwerdling, Orwell’s temperamental pessimism allowed, at certain, strategic moments, for genuine flights of optimism which ultimately enabled his commitment to radical politics. These included, as his overall approval of the revolutionary experiment in Spain attests, a belief “that the competitive drive in human beings which supports a system of inequality need not be stronger than the sense of communal loyalty; that the means used to transform society (whether revolutionary or reformist) do not necessarily compromise the hope of creating a world without privilege.”⁸

A “sense of communal loyalty” seems indeed to be the prevalent and most enduring effect of Orwell’s engagement in the Spanish conflict, one which underpins his subsequent processing of direct personal experience into the sustained political reflection which pervades *Homage to Catalonia*. The book famously opens with the recollection of a chance encounter, at the POUM barracks in Barcelona, with an Italian

⁷ George Orwell, “Letter to Cyril Connolly, 8 June 1937”, in Peter Davison (ed.) *Facing Unpleasant Facts (1937-39): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 28

⁸ Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1974), 63

militiaman who would come to “typify”, retrospectively, “the special atmosphere of that time”, and to represent the peculiar instantiation afforded by the war, in a real, tangible, dimension, of the often abused and reified abstract notions which proliferated in radical political discourse: “[s]omething in his face deeply moved me. It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend – the kind of face you would expect in an Anarchist, though as likely as not he was a Communist.”⁹ Orwell’s instinctive association of the militiaman’s inherent decency with the fundamental ethos of Anarchism is justified by the specifically anarcho-syndicalist profile of the state of affairs he encountered upon arrival in Barcelona. The shock of revelation (the well-nigh epiphanical crystallisation of a liberating vision of secular, egalitarian deliverance) had been recorded a few months earlier by Franz Borkenau in a text that would have a direct influence upon Orwell’s, *The Spanish Cockpit*.¹⁰ Borkenau describes his first impression of the city in transformation as a grand deployment of spectacular proportions:

Again a peaceful arrival. No taxi-cabs, but instead old horse-cabs, to carry us into the town. Few people in the Paseo de Colón. And, then, as we turned round the corner of the Ramblas (the chief artery of Barcelona) came a tremendous surprise: before our eyes, in a flash, unfolded itself the revolution. It was overwhelming. It was as if we had been landed on a continent different from anything I had seen before.

The first impression: armed workers, rifles on their shoulders, but wearing their civilian clothes... The fact that all these armed men walked about, marched, and drove in their ordinary clothes made the thing only more

⁹ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 2000), 1

¹⁰ John Newsinger, *Orwell’s Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 42

impressive as a display of the power of the factory workers. The anarchists, recognizable by badges and insignia in red and black, were obviously in overwhelming numbers. And no bourgeoisie whatever! No more well-dressed young women and fashionable señoritos on the Ramblas! Only working men and working women; no hats even!¹¹

The exhilaration suggested by this passage and the surmise of having landed upon an entirely new “continent” is taken up by Orwell, who recognises the significance of the unfolding spectacle as the effective assumption of power by the working class: “[i]t was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle”.¹² The flourishing of proletarian power is soon confirmed visually by the proliferation of initials allusive to the various unions and parties (CNT, FAI, UGT, POUM etc.), by the accompanying invasion of red and black-and-red flags, revolutionary slogans and mannerisms (in the form of address, for example) and, most importantly, by the radical equalisation of individual appearance, with a virtual banishment of “bourgeois” dress codes. However brutal, tenuous or even pathetic, Orwell acknowledges the sheer importance of this situation as a prelude to the ethical transformation on which his developing idea of Socialism rested:¹³ “All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for”.¹⁴ At the root of this conviction lies a belief in the essential sincerity of the whole process – indeed a belief which will sustain his commitment to Socialism and the anti-fascist

¹¹ Borkenau, *ibid.*, 69-70

¹² Orwell, *ibid.*, 2

¹³ This ethical component is already identifiable in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as an urge to transform the *status quo* motivated by a heightened sense of injustice. As Gordon Bowker points out: “*Homage to Catalonia* is not just a work of shining integrity, but the clearest expression of Orwell’s own version of socialism, one inspired more Christianity than Marx”, *George Orwell* (London: Abacus, 2003), 234-235. See also, Norman Dennis and A.H. Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R.H. Tawney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)

¹⁴ Orwell, *ibid.*, 3

struggle and function as an ethical yardstick in his subsequent exposure of Communist totalitarianism: “[a]bove all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine”.¹⁵

The virtual effacement of class differences was, in Orwell’s opinion, a fundamental inheritance from the early revolutionary stages of the war, which even subsequent betrayals and defections would be unable to fully dismantle. As he would later recall in a review of Mary Low and Juan Breá’s *Red Spanish Notebook*:

For several months large blocks of people believed that all men are equal and were able to act on their belief. The result was a feeling of liberation and hope... No one who was in Spain during the months when people still believed in the revolution will ever forget that strange and moving experience. It has left something behind that no dictatorship, not even Franco’s, will be able to efface.¹⁶

The military revolt of July 18-19, 1936 had issued in the spontaneous formation of workers’ militias by the various political and labour organisations. The massive defection of military cadres to the insurgent camp left the Republican government effectively lacking in defensive resources. Various emergency executive measures were taken after the uprising – including a decree which released enlisted soldiers from their

¹⁵ Orwell, *ibid.*, 4

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1991), 313. In a similar vein, George Woodcock notes that: “[w]hen the Spanish Civil War first broke out it seemed as though the class system had been given a geographical shape, so that the old ruling class was safely behind the Fascist lines, and the workers and their friends on the Republican side could proceed to create a society in which caste differences would no longer exist.”, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 139

oaths of service and subordination to their officers.¹⁷ The effective power vacuum left by the government of José Giral was swiftly filled by the unions and working-class parties, which managed to transform the official inertia into a spontaneous and expedient class response. In the words of President Manuel Azaña:

The rebellion had undermined discipline everywhere. The professional officers were suspect, and the ranks, composed mainly of workingmen, preferred to listen to the directives of their unions or parties than to those of their commanders... The republican government gave arms to the people in order to defend the approaches to the capital. Several thousand rifles were handed out. But in Madrid, and especially in Barcelona, Valencia and other places, the masses stormed the barracks and carried off the arms.¹⁸

Subsequent attempts (notably, during the month of August) by the government to redirect this workerist *élan* and shape it into a government-controlled force failed completely: “thousands upon thousands of volunteers preferred to enlist in the popular militia organized spontaneously by the unions and parties.”¹⁹

The militias’ constitutive inspiration and working rationale was inseparable from the revolutionary goals set down by the more advanced sections of the proletariat which, in places like Barcelona, were predominantly anarcho-sindicalist in orientation.²⁰ The centralising instincts of the Popular Front government were nevertheless opposed by the large mass of proletarian base organisations, whether anarchist (CNT-FAI) or socialist (UGT). The mouthpiece of the UGT (the union headed by the left-socialist current of Largo Caballero), *Claridad*, was unequivocal about the

¹⁷ Bolloten, *ibid.*, 239

¹⁸ Azaña, quoted in Bolloten, *ibid.*, 239

¹⁹ Azaña, quoted in Bolloten, *ibid.*, 240

²⁰ See Robert J. Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Janus Publishing Company, 1999)

revolutionary nature of the spontaneous response of the working-class, and adamant that this should be preserved in any hypothetical reorganisation of Republican forces along more or less conventional military lines:

The new army, if there must be one, should have as its foundation the men who are fighting today and not merely those who have not yet fought in this war. It must be an army that is in keeping with the Revolution... to which the future state will have to adjust itself. To think of replacing the present combatants by another type of army that, to a certain extent, would control their revolutionary action, is to think in a counterrevolutionary way. That is what Lenin said (*State and Revolution*): ‘Every revolution, after destroying the state apparatus, shows us how the governing class attempts to re-establish special bodies of armed men at “its” service, and how the oppressed class tries to create a new organization of this type capable of serving not the exploiters but the exploited.’²¹

The unambiguous tenor of the UGTist approach would confirm both the co-ordinated presence of the revolutionary idea across the broad spectrum of workers’ organisations and their relative independence from Popular Frontist moderation and *realpolitik* (of which, of course, the Communist Party was unhesitantly supportive at this time and throughout the war).

Against this general backdrop of hegemonic revolutionary feeling, the particular pre-eminence accorded to the anarcho-syndicalist programme – and its running mate, the left-communism of the POUM – in urban Catalonia and rural Aragón, can be interpreted as a radical but by no means isolated development of a general trend among

²¹ Quoted in Bolloten, *ibid.*, 241

Spanish proletarian organisations rooted in an advanced vision of class-conscious agency. In this context, the militia system was an organic expression of the revolutionary “consensus”. As Orwell notes: “[t]he workers’ militias... had the effect of canalising into one place all the most revolutionary sentiment in the country. I had dropped more or less by chance into the only community of any size in Western Europe where political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism were more normal than their opposites”.²²

The importance of this discovery for Orwell lies precisely in its practical estrangement from the customary reification and debasement of Socialism’s ethical content, as practised, especially, by the more “official” or “orthodox” expressions of Marxism which he had anatomised in the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Thus, in revolutionary Barcelona: “[t]here is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of Socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilised life – snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc. – had simply ceased to exist”.²³ Orwell concedes that the sheer utopianism of this state of affairs could only condemn it to a short, transitory, existence:

But it lasted long enough to have its effect upon anyone who experienced it.

However much one cursed at the time, one realised afterwards that one had been in contact with something strange and valuable. One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where

²² Orwell, *ibid.*, 82-83

²³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 83

the word 'comrade' stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug.²⁴

This experiential caesura would mark a real departure for Orwell's Socialism. It would ultimately disengage the projective dimension of his analysis from its embryonic moment of negative social critique (as tentatively developed in *The Road to Wigan Pier*) and root it decisively in a concrete, positive arrangement. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, due to the effects this would have on his subsequent development, the direct experiencing of a real, working utopia supplied the moral ground on which his critique of Russophile socialism was premised.²⁵ Having "breathed the air of equality", Orwell reasserts the ethical sources of his initial commitment, definitively severing it from the institutional masquerade and intellectual travesty epitomised by various *Marxisant* species and tragically performed behind the Spanish trenches by an imported variety of Stalinist orthodoxy:

In every country in the world a huge tribe of party-hacks and sleek little professors are busy 'proving' that Socialism means no more than a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact. But there also exists a vision of Socialism quite different from this. The thing that attracts ordinary men to Socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the 'mystique' of Socialism, is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society, or it means nothing at all... In that community where no one was on the make, where there was shortage of everything but no privilege and no boot-licking, one got, perhaps, a crude forecast of what the opening stages of Socialism might be like. And, after

²⁴ Orwell, *ibid.*, 83

²⁵ For more on Orwell's chastisement of the Leftist intelligentsia of the Thirties, see Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2006), 350-372

all, instead of disillusioning me it deeply attracted me. The effect was to make my desire to see Socialism established much more actual than it had been before.²⁶

The evident flaws which beset the militia system (notably, a fundamental lack of military coordination and discipline),²⁷ combined with the relative inaction of the Aragonese front and a consequent desire to “serve the Spanish Government a little more effectively”, had at the time made Orwell critical of the revolutionary approach to the war and determined to transfer to the International Column at the Madrid front. The turn of events which he would encounter upon his return to Barcelona in late April 1937 would however confirm this retrospective watershed which the militia and its enacted “foretaste of Socialism” had signalled for him.²⁸

The “events of May” in Barcelona marked the onset of a Thermidorean phase in the politics of the Republican camp. At the highest level, this internal phase of reaction would climax in the removal from office of the left-wing Socialist PM (a critic of Moscow and supporter of the revolutionary drift taken by the unions), Francisco Largo Caballero, and the accession of the much more amenable to Communist control, Dr. Juan Negrín (on 17 May). At the local/regional level of Catalonia, and especially Barcelona, it would translate as the demise of real power-sharing by all the anti-fascist factions in the devolved Catalan Government (including the POUM and the Anarchists)

²⁶ Orwell, *ibid.*, 84

²⁷ See Bolloten, *ibid.*, esp. pp. 246-254 On the point about discipline, Orwell would write: “[l]ater it became the fashion to decry the militias, and therefore to pretend that the faults which were due to lack of training and weapons were the result of the equalitarian system. Actually, a newly raised draft of militia was an undisciplined mob not because the officers called the privates ‘Comrade’ but because raw troops are *always* an undisciplined mob. In practice the democratic ‘revolutionary’ type of discipline is more reliable than might be expected. In a workers’ army discipline is theoretically voluntary. It is based on class-loyalty, whereas the discipline of a bourgeois conscript army is based ultimately on fear.”, *ibid.*, 27

²⁸ “[F]rom a personal point of view – from the point of view of my own development – those first three or four months that I spent in the line were less futile than I then thought. They formed a kind of interregnum in my life, quite different from anything that had gone before and perhaps from anything that is to come, and they taught me things that I could not have learned in any other way.”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 82

and the rise to hegemony of the Communist-controlled PSUC. And personally, for Orwell, it would transact as a final sanctioning of his “democratic socialist” vision as against the multiple and multiform assaults of life-negating orthodoxy upon the real expressions of human “decency”.

Orwell goes on to record the vexed narrative of this Communist-led, internal “coup” against the more advanced revolutionary factions which had previously led the early political development of the Republican camp. In an attempt to regain control over the city, the security apparatus of the Catalan government had been mobilised against the strategic positions held by the CNT since the beginning of the war. An initial move by the PSUC-dominated police to raid the central telephone exchange on 3 May turned the simmering tension into open armed conflict: “[a]ll I could gather was that the Assault Guards had attacked the Telephone Exchange and seized various strategic spots that commanded other buildings belonging to the workers. There was a general impression that the Assault Guards were ‘after’ the CNT and the working class generally.” The resulting polarisation of loyalties along class lines – and the gradual identification of the different political groups with the pressing alternatives of revolution and counter-revolution – dawned upon Orwell with the urgency of a genuine political awakening:

The poorer classes in Barcelona looked upon the Assault Guards as something rather resembling the Black and Tans, and it seemed to be taken for granted that they had started this attack on their own initiative. Once I had heard how things stood I felt easier in my mind. The issue was clear enough. On one side the CNT, on the other side the police. I have no particular love for the idealised ‘worker’ as he appears in the bourgeois Communist’s mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in

conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on.²⁹

Following the clash between government forces and revolutionary organisations in Barcelona, and the restoration of “order” by the former, the course of the revolution itself and the leading position hitherto maintained by the Anarchists and their left-wing associates, were seriously compromised.³⁰ Concomitantly, and in a clear bid to consolidate Communist power by purging the rear guard of “Trotskyist” elements, a campaign of slander and accusation was orchestrated against the POUM, until finally, on 16 June, the party was outlawed and its leaders arrested.³¹

The repressive backlash resulted in the incarceration and assassination of numerous left socialists from all over Europe and North America, including prominent revolutionaries such as the Austrian Kurt Landau and the Czech Trotskyist, Erwin Wolf. As John McGovern of the ILP noted in his report about the repression, *Terror in Spain* (1937), after a visit to Barcelona’s Modelo Prison:

It was a real Prisoners’ International in the Modelo. They came from France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and America as well as Spain. We were asked by scores of these prisoners to expose the operations of the brutal Cheka, with its torture, third degree and death for militant Socialist fighters in Spain.³²

²⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 103-104

³⁰ According to Burnett Bolloten: “[i]n succeeding weeks the story of Catalonia was one of mass arrests, of detentions in clandestine jails, of tortures, kidnappings, and assassinations, as well as the destruction of agricultural and urban collectives. The spontaneous, undirected terror of the CNT and FAI in the heyday of the Revolution had now given way to the more sophisticated, centrally directed, and, hence, more fearful terror of the Communists.”, Bolloten, *ibid.*, 455

³¹ “I dimly foresaw that when the fighting ended the entire blame would be laid upon the POUM, which was the weakest party and therefore the most suitable scapegoat.”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 118

³² John McGovern, quoted in John Newsinger, *ibid.*, 53

In a remark which resonates with Orwell's increasing awareness of the true nature of Russian intervention, McGovern goes on to observe that there were in fact "two International Brigades in Spain, one a fighting force, drawn from the Socialist Movement of the world, and the other an International Cheka drawn from the Comintern's paid gangsters."³³

Perhaps the most notorious episode of the post-May Thermidor was the abduction and subsequent "disappearance" of the POUM General Secretary and one-time aide of Leon Trotsky, Andreu Nin. A prime target of the Stalinist establishment, Nin was transferred to a secret prison in Alcalá de Henares and tortured in a fruitless attempt to extract a confession of espionage and collaboration with Franco that would ensure the public prosecution of the POUM leadership in a Moscow-style show trial.³⁴ According to one of the arrested leaders, Julián Gorkin, the aim "was not the assassination, pure and simple, of Nin and his principal comrades", but the "conviction, and immediate execution, under the guise of republican legality" of this most coveted of Stalin's preys, the left-communist opposition in Spain.³⁵

The POUM's international affiliation with the British ILP (through whose mediation Orwell had originally enlisted in the former's militia) was likewise about to produce a crisis within the British Left resulting in a sharp break between the independent socialists and the Communists. Attempts to consolidate a "Unity

³³ McGovern, quoted in Newsinger, *ibid.*, 54

³⁴ See Wilebaldo Solano, *El POUM en la Historia: Andreu Nin y la Revolución Española* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 1999) and Michel Christ, *Le POUM: Histoire d'un Parti Révolutionnaire Espagnol* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006)

³⁵ Julián Gorkin, quoted in Bulloten, *ibid.*, 456-457. Victor Serge, one of the leading voices of the anti-Stalinist left would later write in his memoirs: "I knew that once Andreu Nin fell into Russian hands he would never come out alive: he knew Moscow too well... Each one of these crimes was enveloped in the thick, suffocating clouds wafted by the Communist Press. The POUM, the victims of kidnapping, assassination or (as in Mena's case) the firing squad, the revolutionaries in jail, all were unendingly denounced as 'Trotskyists, spies, agents of Franco-Hitler-Mussolini, enemies of the people' in the undiluted style of the Moscow Trials. The average man, who cannot conceive that lying on this scale is possible, is taken unawares by stupendous, unexpected assertions.", *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. by Peter Sedgewick (London: Readers and Writers Publishing Co-operative, 1984), 336, 338

Campaign” of all leftist factions had been set in motion in 1936, drawing the support of political figures of note from the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and the ILP, in a clear bid to cement the so-called “United Front” against fascism. However, the ILP’s increasingly vocal opposition to Soviet policy, as manifested both in the Moscow Trials and in the Spanish backlash against the Revolution and the POUM in particular, were to prove decisive in the eventual shattering of socialist unity.³⁶ The ILP remained, throughout the events of 1937, staunchly critical of Communist policy and resolutely committed to the liberation of imprisoned anti-fascists, to the extent that several delegations (one of them headed by the party leader himself, the widely acclaimed James Maxton) were sent to Spain in an effort to both shed light on the obscure developments of Republican repressive policy and to secure the release of incarcerated POUM and ILP militants.³⁷

Orwell’s emphasis in *Homage to Catalonia* is insistently laid on the anti-revolutionary vocation of Communist policy in Spain, which culminated in the totalitarian move to liquidate its left-wing rivals and critics. A committed anti-Communist response (such as that represented by Orwell’s book) would therefore inevitably amount to a principled exposure of the Popular Front programme as an inherently fraudulent and misleading alliance of opposites ultimately devised to provide an opportunistic justification of Soviet foreign policy. As Orwell observes, “this

³⁶ Paul Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), esp. 129-178

³⁷ See William Knox, *James Maxton* (Manchester: MUP, 1987), 129-130; John McNair, *James Maxton: the Beloved Rebel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 259; see also Gordon Brown, *Maxton: A Biography* (London: Mainstream Publishing, 1986)

alliance... is in essential an alliance of enemies, and it seems probable that it must always end by one partner swallowing the other.”³⁸

Orwell’s articulation of a bitterly critical stance towards Communism in his later years was indubitably shaped by his Spanish experience. However, as he was ready to acknowledge, this chastisement concerned the bureaucratic structures – the, in his telling formulation, “gangster-gramophone” embodiment of Communism – which dominated the movement, rather than the individual Communists who had managed to turn the Spanish War into a sincere outpouring of internationalist solidarity and “common decency”:

One of the most horrible features of war is that all the war propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting. The PSUC militiamen whom I knew in the line, the Communists from the International Brigade whom I met from time to time, never called me a Trotskyist or a traitor; they left that kind of thing to the journalists in the rear.³⁹

The British Battalion of the International Brigades was the British Communist Party’s stake in the conflict.⁴⁰ The prominent role of the Party’s general secretary, Harry Pollitt, and of leading functionaries such as Bill Rust (who would write the first official history of the Battalion, *Britons in Spain*) or J.R. Campbell,⁴¹ attests to the unmixed credentials of the Battalion – along with the rest of the Brigades – as the unambiguous

³⁸ Orwell, *ibid.*, 198

³⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 208; or later on: “Please notice that I am saying nothing against the rank-and-file Communist, least of all against the thousands of Communists who died heroically round Madrid.”, *ibid.*, 211

⁴⁰ Originally known as the “Saklatvala Battalion” in honour of Shapurji Saklatvala. See Marc Wadsworth, *Comrade Sak* (London: Peepal Tree Press, 1998)

⁴¹ See William Rust, *Britons in Spain: the History of the British Battalion of the XVth International Brigade* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939)

instrument of the Comintern. However, it has been suggested that the internal composition of the British unit displayed a more complex and variegated political make-up, often allowing for a multiplicity of opinion and adscription which reflected the diverse political background of British anti-fascist volunteering. In this respect, and despite the close ideological control exerted by the Comintern officialdom within the Brigades (most notoriously represented by the French agent André Marty),⁴² left-wing pluralism was a *de facto* component of the Battalion's political identity. One estimate considers that about one half of the members of the Battalion were Communist, while the remaining half comprised a diverse mix of Liberals, Labour supporters, Trotskyists, and even a "fraction" of twenty-five or thirty anarcho-syndicalists.⁴³

All in all, the political outlook of the volunteers seems to have been much less directly conditioned by Communist Party doctrine than by a deep-seated commitment to native traditions of political radicalism and a loosely defined instinct for social justice, equality and liberty. As James Hopkins has suggested, "the majority of the volunteers, whether Communist or non-communist, possessed a view of the world that was shaped more by Painite radicalism and internationalism than socialist dogma."⁴⁴ Internationalism in particular was one of the main driving forces behind the decision to

⁴² "In addition to those labeled deserters were men identified by the leadership as undesirables, drunks, cowards, the disaffected, criminals, one *Poumista*, one Trotskyist (as well as another who was suspected of such tendencies), a fascist, and no fewer than thirteen "spies".", James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 254-255; see also Tom Buchanan, "Loss, memory and the British "Volunteers for Liberty"", in Tom Buchanan, *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2007)

⁴³ Hopkins, *ibid.*, 140. These, according to Hopkins, "could well have made the battalion's response to the POUM uprising in Barcelona in May 1937 more complex than heretofore thought."

⁴⁴ "The British volunteers possessed a contractual understanding of the relationship between themselves and their governors. What the majority of them wanted was not to overthrow the traditional order but to have their rightful claims, and those of the international working class, recognized by those who ruled or oppressed them. Spain seemed the realization of the dream of a place where men could live, fight and die on egalitarian terms and for consensual purposes, their sacrifices inspiring the script for a rewritten and renegotiated social contract." Hopkins, *ibid.*, 137-138

volunteer, especially in those areas where the vocation of working-class alliances and expressions of solidarity had traditionally displayed an internationalist emphasis.

The case of South Wales is perhaps emblematic in the way that it constituted both an outstanding mainspring of volunteering and an exemplary stronghold of Party discipline.⁴⁵ As Hywel Francis observed in his pioneering study, *Miners Against Fascism*, “the core of the response in Wales to the Spanish Civil War... had its origins in the particular kind of dynamic society being moulded in the mining valleys of South Wales in the crucial years immediately before and during the First World War.”⁴⁶ The coalfield’s cosmopolitan and revolutionary outlook was cemented by the steady influx of immigrants (Spaniards, Italians, French, Jews, Irish, English) which had supplied the expanding industry with a growing labour force in the early decades of the century. The events of 1917 in Russia and the General Strike of 1926 contributed to the consolidation of a “proletarian internationalist” perspective which, as Francis remarks, “was ... out of step with the mainstream of the British labour movement”.⁴⁷ In this context, the distinctive codes of socialisation deployed by Communists – from the family to the workplace –⁴⁸ provided an attractive conduit for working-class universalism, as well as a tangible sense of community and belonging: “[i]n an age of countless small migrations born of war and depression, it provided an instant port of call for the socially or geographically uprooted, with its own lingua franca, shared values, an esoteric roll-call

⁴⁵ In Hopkins’ words, “The Welsh volunteers... formed a working-class elite in Spain because they were comparatively better educated than many of their proletarian comrades in the British Battalion and, moreover, possessed the disciplining experience of active membership in the Communist Party.”, *ibid.*, 147

⁴⁶ Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), 32

⁴⁷ Francis, *ibid.*, 39

⁴⁸ Apropos of the defining role played by the family in this context, Thomas Linehan has observed that “A communist-orientated family network also served to build and sustain communist allegiance and enthusiasm not least because the family network provided mutual support on the basis of a shared perspective and attachment to a common set of goals.”, Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain 1920-1939: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester and N.Y.: M.U.P., 2007)

of celebrities, and habits of meetings, greetings, paper sales and socials to make the new arrival feel instantly at home.”⁴⁹

The coalfield supplied a particularly advantageous scenario for the proliferation of Communist loyalties, since it epitomised the structural homogeneity of a paradigmatic single-industry community behaving as an “isolated mass”.⁵⁰ The role of the South Wales Miners’ Federation (SWMF, or “the Fed” as it was commonly known) in the shaping of this idiosyncratic model of militancy and its specific mode of collective consciousness and proletarian sociality cannot be overstressed. “The Fed” was, in the words of miners’ leader Will Paynter, “the single decisive union operating in the pits, the communities existed around the pit, the union branches were based upon it, hence the integration of pit, people and union into a unified social organism.”⁵¹ The function of the lodges or Federation branches as considerably autonomous bodies amounted to a degree of decentralisation which often clashed with Communist notions of “democratic centralism”. According to Francis, this federalist approach:

[E]ncouraged in its turn an independent or even a rather ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ rank and file outlook towards industrial and political questions which came to be known as ‘lodge politics’. It also manifested itself in an enduring healthy disrespect for leadership but was nonetheless constructive

⁴⁹ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Finn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London, Sydney and Chicago: River Orams Press, 2007), 57

⁵⁰ As one report from 1925 observed, cataloguing the “favourable” conditions – for political conversion – which defined life in the coalfield: “[t]heir conditions are bad, and obviously bad. They are largely free from the distracting influences of the cities. Their time is not so broken up, as it is with workers who live in the big cities, by the long journeys and the many varieties of amusement the big cities provide... Their minds are more fallow. The fact of exploitation is very obvious to them... [T]he pits, themselves, provide opportunities for instant contact and the development of the sense of solidarity amongst them.”, quoted in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Finn, *ibid.*, 63

⁵¹ Will Paynter, quoted in Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A history of the South Wales miners in the twentieth century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), 34

in its impact. The parallels with the strong Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement are obvious and significant.⁵²

The revolutionary process which Orwell had witnessed in Spain – combined with the traumatic experience of Communist totalitarian methods and the blinkered response given by the mainstream left – had placed him firmly on the tracks of revolutionary Socialism and in direct conflict with the “opportunism” of the Popular Front strategy.⁵³ Upon his return to Britain, Orwell joined the ILP, the POUM’s British counterpart and indeed the party which he now regarded as the only repository of relatively unsullied Socialist virtue within the British left.

Integral to this political vision (as his endorsement of Fenner Brockway’s criticisms of the Communist Party line suggests) was the overt opposition to war preparations in what ILPers regarded as the shamefaced contribution (by the Labour Party and others nominally on the left) to a destructive clash between rival imperialisms. Orwell had effectively concluded from his dual struggle against Fascism and Popular Front opportunism in Spain that the right course of action at this stage

⁵² Hywel Francis, *ibid.*, 33. The novels of Communist councillor Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939) provide a forceful intervention and topical commentary on the idiosyncratic political dynamics of the South Wales mining valleys. Despite the strict endorsement of Party orthodoxy propounded especially in the second novel (complete with the protagonist Len Roberts’ volunteering and heroic death in Spain), Jones manages to paint a vivid fresco of communitarian dynamics in the coalfield, articulating a narrative of ideological formation around the strategic hub of the miners’ union. The latter constitutes, especially in the less “Stalinised” *Cwmardy*, an organic intersection of individual and collective life histories, revealing through its process of self-constitution the unmediated centrality accorded to the communitarian trope in Welsh mining culture. See my article “Rising with One’s Community: Socialist Theory and Bildungsroman in Lewis Jones”, *Culture, Language and Representation*, number 7 (2009), 141-156

⁵³ In an approving review of Fenner Brockway’s *Workers’ Front*, Orwell declared that this propositional “alliance of enemies” “must always, in the long run, have the effect of fixing the capitalist class more firmly in the saddle.” “In England, the Popular Front is as yet only an idea, but it has already produced the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa-magnates, publishers, duchesses and Labour M.P.s marching arm in arm to the tune of “Rule Britannia” and all tensing their muscles for a rush to the bomb-proof shelter when and if their policy begins to take effect.” George Orwell, “Review of Fenner Brockway’s *Workers’ Front*”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *Facing Unpleasant Facts (1937-39): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 124

required a frontal challenge to the combined forces of reaction – a sweeping denunciation of despotism (whether in the form of Mosley’s blackshirts or the Comintern “line”) which would fundamentally rescue the core meaning of Socialism from the grip of any totalitarian and undemocratic tendency. As he wrote in the ILP journal, *The New Leader*, upon acceptance of his membership card:

The tempo of events is quickening; the dangers which once seemed a generation distant are staring us in the face. One has got to be actively a Socialist, not merely sympathetic to Socialism, or one plays into the hands of our always-active enemies... I believe that the I.L.P. is the only party which, as a party, is likely to take the right line either against Imperialist war or against Fascism when this appears in its British form.⁵⁴

The ILP provided the ideological security and moral high ground of an uncompromising political vision which had come to embody, in a historical context of Labour and Communist Party betrayals, the best traditions of the British Labour Movement.⁵⁵ It granted a salutary resistance to the unholy alliance between the “gangster and the pansy” – a phrase which polemically summarised Orwell’s perception of the kind of corrupt collusion between an increasingly dogmatic and immoral left intelligentsia and the regimes of brutality which the Popular Front was prone to foster: “[s]omebody in eastern Europe “liquidates” a Trotskyist; somebody in Bloomsbury writes a justification

⁵⁴ George Orwell, “Why I Join the I.L.P.” in Peter Davison (ed.), *Facing Unpleasant Facts (1937-39): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 168

⁵⁵ It is worth recording Jennie Lee’s... “After three hours of communist oratory I crept home feeling dirtied and dejected. Whatever I was looking for, this certainly was not it. I hated the nauseating reiteration of the words traitors, fakirs, applied indiscriminately to all and sundry; I was impatient with the cheap quackery of infallibility that all Communist Party spokesmen laid claim to. I found nothing warming, sustaining in this diet of hate and mechanical Marxist clichés. This was at best a barren caricature of what I believed a revolutionary socialist party should be. I turned back with a feeling of going home to the broad Labour Movement. There, quite plainly, was where I belonged. There were fewer people claiming infallibility in its ranks, there was room for a vigorous exchange of views, here was the hope of turning this vast powerful organization that three generations of my family had loved and laboured for, away from the damning influences of MacDonaldism and forward to socialism.”, Jennie Lee, *To-morrow Is a New Day* (London: The Cresset Press, 1939), 110-111

of it.”⁵⁶ And finally, it provided the springboard for an intellectual withdrawal from the corrupt injunctions of official politics.

The fictional outcome of this phase in Orwell’s political thinking and of the general mood of disillusionment in which it was inevitably steeped was the equally pessimistic novel *Coming Up for Air*. As critic Michael Levenson has pointed out, what makes this book “Orwell’s most deliberate novel of the 1930s is that it owes so much to a coherent body of thought that also informs the important essay ‘Inside the Whale’”.⁵⁷ The critical position which Orwell articulates in “Inside the Whale” represents both the intellectual summation and literary corollary of his break with the Popular Front mentality, as well as an attempt to account for his own disaffiliated and marginal stance in tentative aesthetic-programmatic terms. “Inside the Whale” is a defence of the political quietism espoused by Henry Miller as well as a survey of the historical sequence which had seen the “amoral” leftist orthodoxy of the Auden-Spender generation substitute for the earlier “tragic sense of life” of Joyce, Eliot, Lewis, Pound, Lawrence et al. According to this account, the stifling political atmosphere of the Popular Front years, with its climacteric of purges and disavowal of revolution, had paradoxically provided the ideological ferment on which numerous middle-class conversions to the Communist faith had been secured. Paradoxically, because it had been the comparatively conservative phase of anti-fascism and commitment to liberal democracy of the years 1935-39, rather than the preceding leftist “Class-against-Class” or “Third” Period, which had drawn so many to the International Communist movement.

⁵⁶ George Orwell, “Political Justifications of the Crisis” in Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 244

⁵⁷ Michael Levenson, “The fictional realist: novels of the 1930s”, in John Rodden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2007), 71

Orwell explains this as a natural consequence of the deracination which plagued intellectual and moral life around 1930. With the collapse of earlier faiths – “patriotism, religion, the Empire, the family, the sanctity of marriage, the Old School Tie, birth, breeding, honour, discipline” – the need for substitute attachments followed, giving rise to a series of manic defections to holistic and equally uncompromising worldviews. In a somewhat premonitory intimation of what was to be his own development in the following months, Orwell asks: “[b]ut what do you achieve, after all, by getting rid of such primal things as patriotism and religion? You have not necessarily got rid of the need for *something to believe in*.”⁵⁸

Deprived of an anchoring moral structure and exclusively equipped with an abstract urge to belong, Comintern socialism supplied “a church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline” and therefore a convenient loophole from the challenge of experience (indeed from the sort of “experience” which Orwell sought to place at the root of his own commitments – all the way from Burma, the London and Paris underworlds, Wigan and Spain). Thus “the ‘Communism’ of the English intellectual” was a perfectly natural, if morally debased, expression of contemporary angst: “[i]t is the patriotism of the deracinated.”⁵⁹ This moral deficit was nevertheless the precise backdrop against which a comparative appreciation of political defeatism or acquiescent irresponsibility à la Miller is to be countenanced. It simply represented the state of decay into which opportunism, combined “with a sense of personal immunity” (the fact that these intellectuals could “swallow totalitarianism *because* they have no experience of anything except liberalism”),⁶⁰ had managed to hijack the “public-spiritedness”

⁵⁸ George Orwell, “Inside the Whale”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *A Patriot After All (1940-41): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 102

⁵⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 103

⁶⁰ Orwell discusses Auden’s poem “Spain” – which he parenthetically acknowledges as “one of the few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war”. Orwell, *ibid.*, 103-104

which literature had been invested with in Orwell's own practice (in his project of turning "political writing into an art").

The alternative represented by an author like Miller conjured up a definite suggestion of political detachment yet also – and here Orwell found a priceless counter to the vituperative doxa of official "commitment" – an honest assertion of unmediated individual existence. Whilst fully aware of the historical dynamic which surrounded him, Miller's attitude towards those external forces was one of acceptance and withdrawal, one of sincere disengagement from the burning issues of the day. Orwell evokes the image of Jonah in the belly of the whale (which Miller applied to fellow novelist and lover Anaïs Nin) as one accurately descriptive of his own stance. For indeed, the inside of the whale represents "a cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, [enabling you] to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens... Short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility".⁶¹ What this conscious acceptance betrays is not the possibility of change itself, but the intrinsic immorality (or amorality, even) of political ascription and *parti pris* within the sphere of creative writing.

Orwell draws the conclusion that "from now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer's world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process *as a writer*. For *as a writer* he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism."⁶² This extreme declaration may appear to radically contradict the course of Orwell's own trajectory, seemingly undermining the foundations upon which his engagement *as a writer* rested. "Inside the Whale" culminates a phase of

⁶¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 107

⁶² Orwell, *ibid.*, 111

growing disillusionment with established political affiliations and a corresponding breach of confidence in his role as a committed writer. The retreat represented by *Coming up for Air* is in that sense, a sort of “contribution to the ‘school of Miller’”.⁶³ In other words, the political and ethical self-effacement operated by its protagonist George Bowling does not imply a wholesale rejection of “commitment” per se, but rather a critical – and it could be argued, tactical – withdrawal from available formulae of power worship. With this character, Orwell approximates a conscious embrace of anarchism (which is no longer the embryonic and impressionistic “Tory anarchism” of his earlier years) and a consequent rejection of hegemonic parameters of intervention. The first-person narrative draws a nostalgic trajectory of recovery prizing a foregone world and worldview; an impossible yet by no means superfluous quest for meaning rooted in the attachment to simple earthly pleasures and organic rhythms. These are metonymically signified as a particular time-frame invested with a retroactive phantasmatic quality – an intimation of loss bound up with a vision of utopia: “[b]efore the war it was always summer...The stillness, the green water, the rushing of the weir! It’ll never come again. I don’t mean that 1913 will never come again. I mean the feeling inside you, the feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened”.⁶⁴

This temporally displaced utopia supplies an alternative logic to the ritual depredations of modern life; above all it signifies “a feeling of continuity”, an integral sense of security afforded by people who “didn’t know...that the order of things could change”.⁶⁵ In the face of an undifferentiated and increasingly impersonal existence, perpetually perched on the brink of destruction (and in which everything is “slick and streamlined, everything made of something else”), the sheer immediacy and

⁶³ Levenson, *ibid.*, 72

⁶⁴ George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (London: Penguin, 2000), 105-107

⁶⁵ Orwell, *ibid.*, 110

permanence of a simple activity like fishing provides a necessary – and purposeful – counterblow to the brutal injunctions of the 1930s. George Bowling puts it curtly yet symptomatically: “fishing is the opposite of war”.⁶⁶ Fishing emblematises the logic of resistance put forward in *Coming up for Air*. It expresses both an impossible attachment to a lost world of experience (a longing for organicity) and a wholesale indictment of the spurious modern substitutes.⁶⁷

The sentimental world of Lower Binfield (a world in which “it was always summer”) is not, however, concocted in a vacuum. On the contrary, George Bowling’s exercise in nostalgia is prompted by a sense of contextual urgency, by a biting need to respond to the alienations imposed upon him, rather than by an indiscriminating acquiescence. Prominent among these alienations stands the mechanical insistence on commitment fostered by the “real” world of impending war, mortgage-paying suburban life and Left Book Club meetings. Orwell’s strategy of rejection weaves a binding thread through these – in principle – contradictory positions of consciousness (from petty bourgeois self-delusion to alleged leftist enlightenment), exposing a common lie and degraded moral stance in which the demand for “commitment” ultimately betrays a dishonest reverence for naked, brutal power. This frightful collusion of destructive passions – the bottom line of which is fear –⁶⁸ conspires to push history down the bleak road of a totalitarian future: “[t]he world we’re going down into, the kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed wire, the rubber truncheons.”⁶⁹ Anti-fascism, in this context, merely provides a hate-driven excuse for the general exercise of ever-expanding oppression.

⁶⁶ Orwell, *ibid.*, 24, 85

⁶⁷ As Levenson points out, “[f]ishing in *Coming up for Air* is what sex was in *Tropic of Cancer*”, *ibid.*, 73

⁶⁸ “Fear! We swim in it. It’s our element. Everyone that isn’t scared stiff of losing his job is scared stiff of war, or Fascism, or Communism, or something.”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 15-16

⁶⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 157

This summary diagnosis consequently necessitates, in Orwell's opinion, a militant (not an unaware or in any way frivolous) response which may well, given the circumstances, don the paradoxical form of "irresponsibility". Thus the call for disengagement expressed in "Inside the Whale" is by no means incompatible with a political endorsement of revolutionary pacifism or indeed of a revolutionary purism which would salvage from the Aragonese trenches and street barricades of Barcelona the embodied meaning of equality. On the contrary, it complements a political analysis rooted in radical disillusionment with an aesthetic determination to avoid submission or collaboration with the dehumanising forces of history (whether these are called capitalist, fascist or socialist). In that sense, the "destruction of liberalism" lamented by Orwell in his commentary is predicated on a particular experience of hope and its subsequent repression under the devastating forces of modern history. It does not contradict a belief in or even a passionate hankering for the radical transformation of liberalism's social structures; rather, it signifies a fatalistic recognition of this transformative will's stalling progress at the hands of bureaucratic whim and power grubbing.

If the endorsement of the ILP stance had been arrived at as a result of a painful yet revealing journey of political conversion, with distinct effects as we have seen on his conception of imaginative writing, the articulation of a fully satisfactory answer to the challenge of political life and its recurring intersections with the literary craft remained an unfinished task. From the bitter consciousness evinced by Orwell in "Inside the Whale" to the revised emphases of his programmatic "Why I Write", there lies a critical phase in his development which, as we shall examine in the following pages, would mark both a fundamental shift in his idiosyncratic formulation of Socialism and a notable contribution to the radical debate of the wartime left.

“Why I Write” presents a further stage in Orwell’s ongoing efforts, ever since his experiential breakthrough in Spain, to reconcile an unremitting sense of historical rootedness and political answerability to the social and aesthetic specificities of literature. The temporary compromise-cum-disengagement attained in “Inside the Whale” was, six years later, transmuted into a willing acceptance of “commitment” as an integral approach defining his entire trajectory:

Everyone writes of [political subjects] in one guise or another... And the more one is conscious of one’s political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one’s aesthetic and intellectual integrity.

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, “I am going to produce a work of art.” I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.⁷⁰

The provisional security afforded by Orwell’s revolutionary “withdrawal” of 1939 against the tragic realisation of impending totalitarian hegemony was soon abandoned for a brand of Socialism which seemed to adapt the primal scene of revolutionary experience – Spain – to the specific circumstances of wartime Britain. From a sense of national redefinition (on the domestic front of 1940) of the initial premise, a reconstructive and revisionist history of personal purpose would arise with a future

⁷⁰ George Orwell, “Why I Write”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *Smothered Under Journalism (1946): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 319

claim to the new challenges and accomplishments of the post-1945 period. Thus “[e]very line – Orwell concludes – of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it.”⁷¹

The problem resides, however, in the attempt to explicate Orwell’s evolution, of what conceptual operation takes places during the defining months of the western campaign in 1940, whereby the natural corollary of his response to the totalitarian menace (as he regards it, embodied in the Popular Front) is finally replaced by an enthusiastic belief in the transformative potential of the war. Orwell’s much-quoted answer to the enigma gives the signing of the Russo-German pact of non-aggression as the critical watershed. As he famously noted in “My Country Right or Left”, the true nature of his feelings concerning the war suddenly became apparent in a dream which he supposedly had on the eve of the signing. This oneiric revelation imparted two notions which his previous strategy of resistance had obscured: “first, that I should be simply relieved when the long-dreaded war started, secondly, that I was patriotic at heart, would not sabotage or act against my own side, would support the war, would fight in it if possible.”⁷² The fundamental implication of this change of tack was not a substitution of patriotic feeling for the firm revolutionary internationalism which had animated his participation in the Spanish Civil War, but rather an affirmative adaptation of the revolutionary agenda to the exceptional circumstances brought on by the new conflict. In a context of general emergency and radical social and political changes, patriotism supplied a resilient conduit on which to build the fresh transformative

⁷¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 319

⁷² George Orwell, “My Country Right or Left”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *A Patriot After All (1940-41): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 271

impulse – a secure emotional basis for his Socialism which the defeatist approach of 1939 had clearly lacked. Thus he could go on to claim that:

Patriotism has nothing to do with conservatism... Within two years, maybe a year, if only we can hang on, we shall see changes that will surprise the idiots who have no foresight. I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood. All right, let them, if it is necessary. But when the red militias are billeted in the Ritz I shall still feel that the England I was taught to love so long ago and for such different reasons is somehow persisting.⁷³

The full significance of this reversion to his committed role as an actively dissenting writer and “public intellectual”, beyond the separation of functions advocated in “Inside the Whale”, was to be rehearsed at greater length in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). There is little doubt that, as John Newsinger has pointed out, “Orwell saw the situation in Britain through Spanish glasses.”⁷⁴ His idiosyncratic analysis of the changing political temperature in Britain after the fall of France and the actualisation of the threat to British sovereignty was clearly modelled on the spontaneity and radicalism with which Republican strongholds were imbued in the early stages of the Spanish war. The emblematic status accorded to the popular militias in particular was mobilised as a major inspiration and horizon of political aspiration for Britain’s coming struggle.

The creation of the Local Defence Volunteers (later the Home Guard) following the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden’s radio appeal on May 14th 1940, provided an ideal conduit for the crystallisation, in paramilitary form, of this revolutionary-cum-patriotic fervour. The Home Guard presented veterans from the Spanish war with a sense of continuity with the popular anti-fascist struggle of the

⁷³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 271-272

⁷⁴ John Newsinger, *Orwell’s Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 64

Thirties and, especially, with an opportunity for the redeployment of the revolutionary vision of 1936. In this context, radical voices such as the ex-Communist and once captain of the British Battalion of the International Brigades, Tom Wintringham, became household references overnight. His private training school at Osterley Park, London, would mark one of the utopian feats associated with the early stages of the war, as it sought to equip the Home Guard with a political rationale for the urgent tasks of home defence. Wintringham's slogan, which he popularised through his journalism was "An Aroused People, an Angry People, an Armed People" – an unequivocal invocation of his radical democratic agenda for the art of war.⁷⁵ Wintringham's highly topical efforts included a number of books on the urgency of army reform and the intrinsic virtues of voluntary military organisation.⁷⁶ The zeal with which Wintringham credited these "armies of freemen" no doubt played a significant part in the actual dynamics of volunteering. As Angus Calder has observed: "it was clear from the outset that no modest role as observers would content the LDV when the time came. Volunteers intended to defend their villages and streets, and to blow up a few tanks in the process. As equipment, very slowly, became available, Britain acquired a network of amateur garrisons which would have harassed and held up a determined invader."⁷⁷

Orwell's assessment of the Home Guard in late 1940 and early 1941 (in articles such as "The Home Guard and You" and "Don't Let Colonel Blimp Ruin the Home Guard") is indicative of the strategic importance he accorded, in parallel with Wintringham and other veterans from the Spanish Civil War, to the institution of a genuinely popular paramilitary force along potentially revolutionary lines.⁷⁸ As he

⁷⁵ See Hugh Purcell, *The Last English Revolutionary: Tom Wintringham 1898-1949* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004)

⁷⁶ See, especially, Tom Wintringham, *Deadlock War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), *Armies of Free Men* (London: Paul Routledge, 1940), *New Ways of War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940)

⁷⁷ Angus Calder, *The People's War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 126-127

⁷⁸ See Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 268

pointed out in “The Home Guard and You”, “[f]or the first time in British history the chance exists for socialists to have a certain amount of influence in the armed forces of the country.”⁷⁹ But this potential development in a revolutionary or radically transformative direction was by no means a foregone conclusion. It would have to overcome the resistance of a rival trend which saw the formation of these volunteer units as merely the “the complete answer to the “old sweat’s” prayer”⁸⁰ or, in other words, a regressive opportunity for the Colonel Blimps of the Great War. In Orwell’s view, two distinct and contradictory “currents of thought” were to be distinguished in the Home Guard. One was the popular democratic strand associated with Wintringham, Hugh Slater and the Osterley Park School, whilst the other derived from the conservative, “parade-ground” mentality of the old guard.⁸¹ As a result, observed Orwell, the “Home Guard is trembling in the balance, uncertain whether it wants to become a real People’s Army or a not-very-good imitation of the pre-war Territorials”.⁸²

Given the emergency of the hour, it was the duty of Socialists to enter the Home Guard with a view to influencing its political direction, for “the influence of even a few thousand men who were known to be good comrades *and* to hold left-wing views could be enormous.”⁸³ At this point Orwell arrives at a moment of synthesis, adapting the ILP-POUM stance towards the Spanish situation to the specific circumstances of Britain in 1940. As he argued in “Our Opportunity” (an article which was reprinted in Victor Gollancz’s collection *The Betrayal of the Left: An Examination and Refutation of Communist Policy* as “Patriots and Revolutionaries”): “England is in some ways

⁷⁹ George Orwell, “The Home Guard and You”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 310

⁸⁰ Quoted in Calder, *ibid.*, 122

⁸¹ See S.P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard: A Military and Political History* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1995)

⁸² Orwell, *ibid.*, 310

⁸³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 311

politically backward, extremist slogans are not bandied to and fro as they are in continental countries, but the feeling of all true patriots and all true Socialists is at bottom reducible to the “Trotskyist” slogan: “[t]he war and the revolution are inseparable.”” Consequently, Orwell concludes: “[m]uch of the failure of the English Left is traceable to the tendency of Socialists to criticise current movements from the outside instead of trying to influence them from within”.⁸⁴ Orwell’s semi-Trotskyist argument turns here into an unabashed recommendation of entryism. Only a Home Guard penetrated by conscious Socialists would preserve it from the reactionary drift induced by Colonel Blimp. And yet at the same time, only a genuine commitment to the patriotic, as much as the revolutionary, struggle would secure – *contra* the “defeatists”, Communists and ILPers alike – the eventual success of Socialism.

The final modulation of this “revolutionary patriotic” agenda was largely due, as Bernard Crick has observed, to “a remarkable conjunction” of people that congregated in London during the summer months of 1940.⁸⁵ These included the Zionist propagandist Tosco Fyvel, who had previously written an insightful dissection of the contemporary situation in *The Malady and the Vision*, the publisher Frederic Warburg (who served in Orwell’s Home Guard unit) and the anti-Nazi refugee and later German correspondent of *The Observer*, Sebastian Haffner – as well as Orwell himself.⁸⁶ The foursome’s regular meetings in Warburg’s London flat and in Fyvel’s farmhouse in Berkshire soon gave rise to an editorial project – “an important new series” –which would capitalise on the ripe political atmosphere of the post-Dunkirk months.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ George Orwell, “Our Opportunity”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 346, 348

⁸⁵ Crick, *ibid.*, 272

⁸⁶ Crick, *ibid.*, 272

⁸⁷ As Warburg would later recall: “[t]he subject for discussion was the transformation of Tory England from the slovenly nation that had come to defeat and almost to disaster at Dunkirk into an up-to-date socialist community which could inspire the world. This gigantic task, impossible as it may seem now, did not appear to us impracticable then... But men like ourselves, too old or too unhealthy to fight, could

Fyvel's *The Malady and the Vision*, in particular, has been vindicated as “the intellectual inspiration” for the Searchlight Series.⁸⁸ The book (“an analysis of political faith”, according to its subtitle) presents a historical survey of the various European trajectories of descent into the dire condition of 1940, charting Germany's, Russia's and Britain's fates since the Great War. In a characteristic gesture which would reverberate throughout Orwell's prognostic statements in his writings of the period, Fyvel conjures up a distinct sense and foreboding of finality:

The memories suggest that there is around us a sense of an end. And end to – what? To say, an end to capitalism, to Western civilisation, is to repeat what has been said so often as to be trite, yet in a far deeper sense than most have thought, it is true: we have come to an end, an utter end of the life in which the relation of man to man is determined by a money civilisation, of the life of our sprawling cities, of the anonymous urban crowd.⁸⁹

The first volume to appear in the Series, in what was to some extent a programmatic development from Fyvel's oracular vision, was Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (published in February 1941), an essay which articulated a particular bid for action with a mature statement of his views about the imbrication between national imagination and Socialism.⁹⁰ The essay famously opened with the line “As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me”, which immediately launched into a sustained reflection about the uniquely mobilising power of the national idea, over against its rivals, religion and class: “[o]ne cannot see the modern world as it is unless

feed ourselves on little but hope – and dreams of Utopia. So it was that we felt certain we could ourselves do a great deal to bring about a British renaissance.”, Fredric Warburg, quoted in Newsinger, *ibid.*, 70

⁸⁸ As Newsinger points out, “[a] good case can be made that this neglected volume was the intellectual inspiration of the ‘Searchlight’ series.”, Newsinger, *ibid.*, 70

⁸⁹ T.R. Fyvel, *The Malady and the Vision: An Analysis of Political Faith* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1940), 11

⁹⁰ John Rossi, “‘My country, right or left: Orwell's patriotism”, in John Rodden (ed.), *ibid.*, 94

one recognizes the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty. In certain circumstances it can break down, at certain levels of civilization it does not exist, but as a *positive* force there is nothing to set beside it.”⁹¹

In the present context, Orwell argued, it was Fascism and Nazism’s awareness of this irreplaceable dynamic which had granted these movements the psychological upper hand over their domestic adversaries (especially on the Left). Only a commensurate response from the Socialist camp could therefore generate the necessary breakthrough. But the first step on the road to radical social deliverance demanded an effort, on the part of those self-styled left-wingers ever so prone to “chip away at English morale, trying to spread an outlook that was sometimes squashily pacifist, sometimes violently pro-Russian, but always anti-British”,⁹² to come to terms with “the emotional unity” which ultimately transpired from and transcended class divisions and factional antagonisms in moments of crisis: “[t]he nation is bound together by an invisible chain. At any normal time the ruling class will rob, mismanage, sabotage, lead us into the muck; but let popular opinion really make itself heard, let them get a tug from below that they cannot avoid feeling, and it is difficult for them not to respond”.⁹³

In other words, “let the people sing”, in the popular slogan suggested by J.B. Priestley,⁹⁴ and the organic linkage of the national imaginary will deliver, by an induced

⁹¹ George Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 392

⁹² Orwell, *ibid.*, 406

⁹³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 401

⁹⁴ J.B. Priestley, *Let the People Sing* (London: Heinemann, 1939). Priestley’s concerns, as expressed in this early wartime intervention on the social condition of the nation, are noticeably germane to Orwell’s theme in *The Lion and the Unicorn*. According to John Baxendale: “[Priestley’s] complaints... were by now familiar, but expressed with a new urgency: the lack of real democracy, the dominance of the City, a plutocracy concealed behind a ‘vast fancy-dress ball’ of snobbery, everything run by the Right People in their own interests, and the passivity of the middle classes who could lead the way to change but were not doing so. England was depicted as a tired country living on its inheritance, with no great creative idea to inspire it. But still there were qualities in the ordinary English people, tolerance, kindness, a commitment to human values rather than theories of economics or politics, which could lead the way towards a new and better society, something that was neither communism nor fascism nor a sham capitalist democracy.”,

sense of collective answerability, its fruits of social transformation. Orwell's notorious comparison of England to a "rather stuffy Victorian family" (a "family with the wrong member in control") or even the crowning metaphor of the book's first section ("England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past"),⁹⁵ is ultimately inextricable from the political corollary of the book – that the revolution was impending and inseparable from the war. The vindication of organic continuity therefore entailed a political horizon which did not flounder in the remote, abstract sphere of "intellectual" conceptualisation, but which was tangibly grounded in the substance of national culture (a substance made up, as he memorably suggested, of "solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes"),⁹⁶ understood as a "whole way of life", in a formula which would provide a crucial point of reference in later analyses, as we will see when we discuss Williams.

The Socialism of *The Lion and the Unicorn* is the remarkable product of yet another moment of synthesis. It derives its strategic momentum from Orwell's Spanish experience in the militia, yet it tempers that revolutionary urgency with a pondered consideration of national feeling (and its impervious reference to continuity and organicity). At this point, Orwell "negotiate[s] a way between reform and revolution". "This third way", writes Newsinger, "would... make it possible to carry through a socialist transformation of Britain that would nevertheless leave intact what he considered to be the essential qualities and character of the British national culture."⁹⁷

John Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2007), 142

⁹⁵ Orwell, *ibid.*, 409

⁹⁶ Orwell, *ibid.*, 393

⁹⁷ John Newsinger, *ibid.*, 76-77 Orwell qualifies his position thus: "[i]t is only by revolution that the native genius of the English people can be set free. Revolution does not mean red flags and street fighting, it means a fundamental shift of power", Orwell, *ibid.*, 415

Orwell's vision of utopia in 1941 is paradoxically fuelled by a desire to see both "red militias billeted in the Ritz" and the essential "decency" of British national culture enshrined in a new social landscape shorn of snobbery and privilege. Here the "Orwell paradox" begins to show through the cracks of an ideological edifice whose tenuousness must be imputed to the simultaneous challenge of an impossible (when not overtly treacherous and vocally reactionary) official leftism and a resilient class structure forever welded to the fetishism of inequality which had first prompted Orwell's trajectory. The fragile marriage of heaven and hell – of Revolution and English patriotism which he attempts in 1940-41 is a symptom of this impossible position – of this traumatic deadlock between, so to speak, "Britannia" (the hierarchical dialectics of Nation and Empire) and "Oceania" (the corruption of the egalitarian ideal). The titanic effort to break free of these brutal opposites entails a highly imaginative, at times fanciful, at times contradictory – yet always hopeful – vocation to construct a particular alternative; a highly topical resolution of the immediate conjuncture which almost invariably bears the marks of paradox:

An English Socialist government will transform the nation from top to bottom, but it will still bear all over it the unmistakable marks of our own civilization... It will not be doctrinaire, nor even logical. It will abolish the House of Lords, but quite probably will not abolish the Monarchy. It will leave anachronisms and loose ends everywhere, the judge in his ridiculous horsehair wig and the lion and the unicorn on the soldier's cap-buttons. It will not set up any explicit class dictatorship. It will group itself round the old Labour Party and its mass following will be in the Trade Unions, but it will draw into it most of the middle class and many of the younger sons of the bourgeoisie. Most of its directing brains will come from the new

indeterminate class of skilled workers, technical experts, airmen, scientists, architects and journalists, the people who feel at home in the radio and ferro-concrete age. But it will never lose touch with the tradition of compromise and the belief in a law that is above the State. It will shoot traitors, but it will give them a solemn trial beforehand and occasionally it will acquit them. It will crush any open revolt promptly and cruelly, but it will interfere very little with the spoken and written word. Political parties with different names will still exist, revolutionary sects will still be publishing their newspapers and making as little impression as ever. It will disestablish the Church, but will not persecute religion. It will retain a vague reverence for the Christian moral code, and from time to time will refer to England as “a Christian country”. The Catholic Church will war against it, but the Nonconformist sects and the bulk of the Anglican Church will be able to come to terms with it. It will show a power of assimilating the past which will shock foreign observers and sometimes make them doubt whether any revolution has happened.⁹⁸

The limited yet inspirational breakthrough of 1945, the establishment of a social democratic blueprint for radical social transformation represented, for Orwell, the compromise imposed upon the egalitarian ideal in the defensive strategy against the “gangster-gramophone” assault upon living Socialism as he had experienced it in 1937.

Labour’s wartime “vision of Socialism” was largely premised, as the Labour politician and Deputy PM, Herbert Morrison, had declared in 1945, on an extension of the “Dunkirk spirit” beyond the confines of its contextual urgency – a galvanic moment of unprecedented popular mobilisation transformed into a continued, sustained, effort of

⁹⁸ Orwell, *ibid.*, 427

“moral” re-foundation of the national collectivity.⁹⁹ The war effort had revealed a profound distrust in standard modes of social interaction motivated – as the ominous experience of the 1930s had demonstrated – by exclusive criteria of private profit-making. The new outlook, forged in the experience of the Blitz, prescribed, according to Morrison, “an altered moral sense of the community”, in which the narrow logic of private enterprise was overruled by a wider-encompassing standard of social initiative.¹⁰⁰

The election of the Labour Government in July 1945 prompted a sharp turn in the course of British political life. Even if the roots of this radical “drift” lay firmly in the immediate past, in structural and superstructural changes brought about by the national emergency of war, it also marked a culmination in the steady advance of radical ideas forged over decades of struggle.¹⁰¹ As Francis Williams observed, Labour’s 1945 victory was “the manifestation not simply of a transitory mood at one general election, but of a genuine and cumulative increase over many years of popular support for Socialist policies that had been advanced with increasing precision in every phase of the Labour Party’s history.”¹⁰² To this cumulative process an amount of topical urgency was undeniably attached, as both the potential for collective resilience in the face of imminent danger was made apparent by recent events and the ominous memory of (equally) collective failure in the years of the Depression weighed down heavily on broad sectors of the electorate. Some degree of scholarly consensus has been reached in the assessment of wartime radicalism as an original and manifestly potent expression of

⁹⁹ Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson, Nick Tiratsoo, *‘England Arise!’: The Labour Party and popular politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 81

¹⁰⁰ Fielding, Thompson, Tiratsoo, *ibid.*, 81

¹⁰¹ See Jim Fyrth, “Days of Hope: the Meaning of 1945”, in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *Labour’s Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-1951* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), Sarah Benton, “The 1945 ‘Republic’”, *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), 249-282 and Austin Mitchell, *Election ’45: Reflections on the Revolution in Britain* (London: Fabian Society, 1995)

¹⁰² Quoted, Steven Fielding “What did ‘the People’ Want?: The Meaning of the 1945 General Election”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3 (September 1992), 625

a desire for social transformation – a wish formation variously rehearsing elements of fully fledged Socialism, broad democratic radicalism, pro-Russian feeling, Popular Frontism and anti-Fascism.¹⁰³

The resumption of normal political activity after the dissolution of the wartime coalition and the cessation of the “truce” between Labour and the Conservatives confronted both parties with issues of doctrinal identity which had been passed over in an effort of institutional neutrality and non-partisanship. For Labour, this meant squarely addressing its socialist credentials in relation to the urgent tasks of reconstruction which lay ahead and which would invariably preside over the electoral contest. The pragmatic radicalism advanced by wartime reform and symbolised by the names of Beveridge and Keynes found continuance in Labour’s self-stylisation as the “People’s Party” – as the true-blue expression of essential, democratic, Britishness, attesting to its secular tradition of practical-mindedness. An early nineteenth-century radical discourse was resuscitated in a visionary notion of “the People” which transcended – without excluding – the more traditional foothold of Labour identity among the industrial working classes.¹⁰⁴

The People was made up of “the producers, the consumers, the useful people”, a wide-encompassing section of the national fabric which could identify, in negative terms, with those excluded from the stratospheric heights of inter-war “big business”.¹⁰⁵ This discursive manoeuvre easily left Conservative representation erring on the side of

¹⁰³ See Jim Fyrrh (ed.), *ibid.*; see also Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds.), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), and Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2003)

¹⁰⁴ Robert Looker, “A Golden Past? The Labour Party and the Working Class in 1945”, in Jim Fyrrh (ed.), *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ See Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 14-15

the “unproductive” layers, “the big landowners, the captains of industry, the financial magnates, the powerful merchants, the cartel controllers, the bankers, the landlords and the rentiers”.¹⁰⁶ Labour’s manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, made an explicit appeal to Labour’s idiosyncratic blend, to the grand native traditions of parliamentary democracy and co-operation against the tyranny of privilege and property. It also proclaimed to be “a Socialist Party, and proud of it”, its “ultimate purpose at home” being the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain – free, democratic, efficient, progressive, public-spirited, its material resources organised in the service of the British people.”¹⁰⁷ Gradualism featured as an organic part of its revolutionary logic – however paradoxical that may sound – and Parliament remained a mainspring of its political dynamic. As Fielding, Thompson and Tiratsoo suggest, “Labour believed itself to be the consummation of an indigenous progressive political tradition”,¹⁰⁸ a realisation of the long-abiding promise of redemption cultivated by Britain’s historic radicalisms – a vision of “Merrie England” itself made feasible by reconstructive urgency and public responsibility.

As the Fabian author John Parker noted, the Party represented “the latest attempt of the forces of the Left to extend the rights of common people against the forces of privilege” and was the direct “inheritor of the achievements of those who fought for liberty in the past”.¹⁰⁹ Labour’s heritage of radical transformation was solidly rooted in the lineage of British liberty. It was therefore essential for the movement at this crucial hour to preserve the nature and working rationale of its institutions:

¹⁰⁶ Steven Fielding, “‘To Make Men and Women Better Than They Are’: Labour and the Building of Socialism”, in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *ibid.*, 18

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1945/1945-labour-manifesto.shtml>

¹⁰⁸ Fielding, Thompson, Tiratsoo, *ibid.*, 86

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Fielding, in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *ibid.*, 18

Here in our own land... we have the chance to put political democracy to its greatest test. Fascism and Stalinism pour scorn on the very name. We, in our democratic Socialist movement, have never subscribed to those sneers. Political democracy was won for us in fierce battles against property. In the American War of Independence, in the French Revolution, in the struggles of the Chartists and all the other great battles, this instrument was fashioned for us. All those, our great forebears, believed they were sharpening a weapon which would be our strongest aid in the challenge to property and inequality and the other evils of society.¹¹⁰

The emphasis was thus increasingly placed on a metonymic operation of Party substituting for Nation – that is, of a democratic political heritage as that represented by the British Labour Movement answering to the particular needs and qualities of the British people, rather than emanating from alien sources with totalitarian overtones. As Herbert Morrison would put it in 1946, “planning as it is now taking place in this country under our eyes, is something new and constructively revolutionary which will be regarded in times to come as a contribution to civilization as vital and distinctly British as parliamentary democracy and the rule of law”.¹¹¹ Against this background, on which Labour and generally progressive thought had fed throughout the war,¹¹² Churchill’s quip – during the election campaign – that socialism could only be introduced with the help of some sort of Gestapo (a notion theoretically developed by free market apologists such as Hayek),¹¹³ necessarily failed to command a sympathetic

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Fielding, Thompson, Tiratsoo, *ibid.*, 87-88

¹¹¹ Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 274

¹¹² See also Stephen Brooke, *Labour’s War: the Labour Party and the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)

¹¹³ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2001 [1944]); see also Orwell’s review of this path-breaking book, George Orwell, “Review of *The Road to Serfdom* by F.A. Hayek; *The Mirror*

response from the labouring and professional layers – that is, from the middle sections of the British populace which Labour now addressed as its natural allies.

A central concern of Labour's project of national re-foundation lay in the ethical and conceptual de-legitimisation of those core tenets of *laissez-faire* ideology which had hitherto secured a grip over social and political life. A major expression of Labour's more advanced intuitions and formulations came from party chairman and prominent political scientist Harold Laski. Laski produced a landmark text in 1943 entitled *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, in which the case for planning reached its theoretical peak within the doctrinal parameters of Labour's democratic tradition.

The desirability of Socialism was not premised on political whim or arbitrary design on the part of individuals or organisations, but followed logically from the historical stalemate reached by capitalism in its monopolist phase. Laski reproduced elements of the standard Marxist analysis of the fascist phenomenon, linking the extent and nature of totalitarian state power and its associated brand of "planning" to the inevitable decline of free market economics. Presented with a narrow choice, democracies would have to opt for planning with freedom, as consecrated by the heritage and programmes of British social-democracy or else succumb to the arbitrariness of decaying capitalism within the available structures of totalitarianism. The danger of counter-revolution lurked in the wings of free market dynamics, for "when a society built upon the acquisitive principle passes into its phase of contraction, it entrusts its defence of the principle to men like Hitler and Mussolini and Laval".¹¹⁴ This desperate recourse was further endorsed on psychological grounds by the mass of

of the Past by K. Zilliacus", in Peter Davison (ed.) *I Have Tried to Tell the Truth 1943-1944: The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 149-150

¹¹⁴ Harold J. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Frank Cass, 1968 [1943]), 314-315; see also Kenneth R. Hoover, *Economics As Ideology: Keynes, Laski, Hayek and the Creation of Contemporary Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003)

the people. Deprived, by a general failure of societal values, of their collective “right to hope”, they would be easily enticed by the dictatorial offer of “relief from uncertainty”.¹¹⁵ Only a guaranteed articulation of political and economic liberty (i.e. freedom with planning) could possibly usher in the preservation of democracy against the interconnected threats of free market anarchy and totalitarian control.

Laski’s argument explicitly contradicts *laissez-faire* assumptions about the nature of political freedom and its presumed dependency on free enterprise. Contrary to liberal economic orthodoxy, an unregulated market society – as the inter-war order demonstrated – “cannot be a free society because its internal strains deprive it of security; it is therefore fearful and deprived of the climate in which the power to reason is assured”.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the conceptual remit of the term “freedom” cannot be removed from particular historical and generally contextual circumstances which invariably result in different meanings and emphases. Notions such as “freedom of choice” are inseparable from a wider framework of social equality in whose absence no community of sense can be achieved (and consequently, no equal value can be attached). Material privation and affluence afford irreconcilable standpoints for a common judgement of abstract principles: only a shared background in mutually intelligible positions can attain a valid assessment of results and experiences. Similarly, argues Laski, “[t]he danger of bureaucracy implicit in state-ownership will impress Mr. Ford far more than it is likely to impress one of Mr. Ford’s employees who is seeking to escape victimization because one of Mr. Ford’s industrial spies has reported that the employee has joined a union.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Laski, *ibid.*, 180

¹¹⁶ Laski, *ibid.*, 186

¹¹⁷ Laski, *ibid.*, 316

In this context of ingrained inequality upon which the acquisitive society rests, planning offers a system of checks and controls conducive to the reapportioning of freedom across the social body. It bids for a re-articulation of equality and freedom after years of theoretical divorce and for a restoration of the sense of community under whose exclusive sanction democracy may survive. Laski admits that this need not imply

[T]he necessity of taking over all industry and agriculture by the State.

Rather, I think, it means that the fundamental bases of economic power shall be in the hands of the community; once they are assured to the interest of the many, instead of the few, the economic future can develop within the framework defined by the possession of these fundamental bases by the historic methods of parliamentary democracy.¹¹⁸

Laski goes on to outline a basic package of measures synonymous not with the full-fledged establishment of Socialism but, rather, with “the different, though related [purpose] of safeguarding our political democracy against those forces of counter-revolution which are present among ourselves, and were growing in authority and determination before the outbreak of war.”¹¹⁹

For Orwell, the socialist drift to planning was not as evident and natural as Laski made it out to be. He concurred that Socialism, defined as the articulation of political freedom and economic democracy, was the desirable objective in the wake of capitalist failure, but he also noted the ominous possibilities inscribed in the historic emergence of different formulas of centralised planning. Thus, in his review of Laski’s *Reflections*, Orwell detected an “apparent... unwillingness to admit that Socialism has totalitarian

¹¹⁸ Laski, *ibid.*, 307

¹¹⁹ Laski, *ibid.*, 310

possibilities.”¹²⁰ Over and against the ritual Marxist interpretation of the fascist phenomenon as a mere retrenchment of capitalism in the face of a proletarian menace, Socialists needed to face the fact “that the ‘contradictions’ of capitalism can be got rid of non-democratically and without any increase in individual liberty. Economic insecurity can be abolished at the price of handing society over to a new race of oligarchs.”¹²¹

In an article published in *The Left News* in April 1941, Orwell had already laid down the basic outline of an analysis which would depart from the logic of Socialist “necessity” articulated by commentators such as Laski. Thus the “movement towards collectivism goes on all the time, though it takes varying forms, some hopeful, others horrible.” What needed to be recognised was that the fascistic systems often managed to “avoid all the chaos and friction of capitalism, the slumps and crises, the unemployment and stagnation.”¹²² Nazi Germany (and Soviet Russia, for that matter) appeared to develop novel structural features which circumvented the traditional pitfalls of the market society, whilst retaining a commitment to inequality and savage oppression. Neither Socialism nor capitalism, this new reality was best described in what was to be an enduring formula, as “oligarchical collectivism”. The crucial aspect of this emergent “movement towards collectivism”, however, was that its general development was irreducible to a single pattern or irrevocable “fate”: “it is not certain that it will be all the same in a hundred years, or a thousand years, or perhaps even ten thousand years, and therein lies the whole reason for struggle.”¹²³

¹²⁰ George Orwell, “Review of *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* by Harold J. Laski” [10 October 1943], in Peter Davison (ed.) *Orwell and Politics* (London: Penguin, 2001), 202-203

¹²¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 203-204

¹²² George Orwell, “Will Freedom Die with Capitalism”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *A Patriot After All (1940-41): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 461

¹²³ Orwell, *ibid.*, 461

Laski's analytical fusion of political democracy and economic equalisation thus seemed to fail on the plane of particular observation and concrete historical experience. The upkeep of democratic Socialism required, in the first instance, an accurate description of the singular viability of totalitarian systems as an alternative to Socialist collectivism. Yet it also – and most importantly – demanded a hopeful recognition of the open possibilities ahead: a critical consciousness of the “unresolved” nature of the current drift, and of the urgency to enter the contest for collectivisation on the side of Socialism.

3. Socialism and the Totalitarian Abyss

Orwell's paradigmatic analysis of the totalitarian phenomenon developed from a crucial realisation of the "open" profile of ongoing transformations in capitalism, from a clear understanding of the singularity of Fascist and Stalinist adaptations of the idea of economic planning in combination with a sheer negation of the basic components of the Socialist project of human emancipation. Orwell's "theoretical" detour at this point in his programme-building takes him through the intricate debates of Trotskyism around the precise nature of the bureaucratic regimes which, at the breaking-point of the *laissez-faire* paradigm, had managed to offer a pseudo-collectivist alternative shorn of egalitarian traces.

Throughout the 1930s, the notion of "revolutionary betrayal" had become a standard trope in left-communist analyses of the Stalinist Thermidor in the Soviet Union in a way which could not fail to resonate (especially after 1937) with highly topical developments in Spanish Republican politics. This entailed a break or departure from the hitherto accepted analysis offered by the Trotsky circle (which had previously entertained a "factionalist" interpretation of the bureaucratic distortion and concluded that the latter would end in defeat), and a move towards the assumption that the consolidation of the regime in the USSR signified a definitive suppression of the specifically progressive political content of the Revolution.

In his standard study of 1937, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky retained a somewhat ambivalent interpretation of the Soviet Union as a "degenerated workers' state" combining a socialistic economic base with an encroaching political caste of

reactionary bureaucrats.¹ Trotsky paradoxically acknowledged the dual function of the bureaucracy as both upholding the objectively progressive nature of socialised property relations and yet representing a political obstacle to revolutionary consolidation:

Without a planned economy the Soviet Union would be thrown back for decades. In that sense the bureaucracy continues to fulfil a necessary function. But it fulfils it in such a way as to prepare an explosion of the whole system which may completely sweep out the results of the revolution... The revolution which the bureaucracy is preparing against itself will not be social, like the October revolution of 1917. It is not a question this time of changing the economic foundations of society, of replacing certain forms of property with other forms... The overthrow of the Bonapartist caste will, of course, have deep social consequences, but in itself it will be confined within the limits of political revolution.²

This interpretation created a number of tensions within the international Trotskyist movement climaxing in a number of defections which in some cases, as that of James Burnham, would eventually pursue highly controversial analyses of the Soviet regime along distinctly anti-socialist lines.

In a critical article published in the internal bulletin of the American Socialist Workers' Party, Burnham took issue with this dual and, in his opinion, highly

¹ The controversy surrounding the precise theoretical status of the Soviet bureaucracy – whether it was to be conceived of as a political “caste” or self-appointed clique encroaching upon a socialist society or as an entirely new “class” would lead to a fruitful debate within the ranks of critical Marxism. For two controversial yet influential readings of Stalinism as “bureaucratic collectivism”, see Bruno Rizzi, *The Bureaucratization of the World. The USSR: Bureaucratic Collectivism* trans. by Adam Westoby (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985) and Max Shachtman, *The Bureaucratic Revolution* (New York: Donald Press, 1962). The dissident Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas would later popularise the thesis that the Soviet bureaucracy had solidified into a “new class”: see Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957)

² Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* Trans. by Max Eastman, (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1937), 285-6, 288

contradictory, interpretation of the Stalinist phenomenon. According to the prevalent view, endorsed by Trotsky himself, Stalinism performed two distinct and mutually exclusive functions internally and externally. While it displayed a dual domestic character as both a structural prop of socialist property relations and yet a political limit to their development, internationally, Stalinism had confined itself to an exclusively reactionary role (as Popular Frontism in general and the Spanish situation in particular, demonstrated). However, Burnham contended, “Stalinism, even Stalinism in Spain, is surely not a “Spanish phenomenon”. Stalinism in Spain as in the Soviet Union and in every other country, springs, we have always taught, from the soil of the Soviet Union, where among other features, nationalized property relations and the monopoly of foreign trade still obtain.”³ It therefore followed, according to Burnham, that the dual interpretation of bureaucratic power negated the “class analysis of social phenomena” in that it revoked the complex analysis of political *and* economic aspects without reducing one to the other. “Now what the last twenty years, in particular the last two or three years, have taught us, if we wish to be taught, is exactly that nationalized production of and by itself does *not* make a workers’ state, does *not* guarantee the class rule of the workers, does *not* assure the transition to socialism. For these things there is a *political* as well as a socioeconomic precondition.”⁴ Property rights and relations, Burnham argued, were independent of the political structure which, alone, could express the class nature of a particular state. Therefore, the factual isolation of the Soviet working class from the sphere of power disqualified the characterisation of the Soviet Union as any kind of “workers’ state” – degenerate or otherwise.

³ James Burnham, “From Formula to Reality”, in Ernest E. Haberkern and Arthur Lipow (eds.), *Neither Capitalism Nor Socialism: Theories of Bureaucratic Collectivism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996), 6

⁴ Burnham, *ibid.*, 8

This theoretical dispute within the ranks of Trotskyism would result, for Burnham, in eventual disaffection from the movement and in a sharp turn to the right. For our present purpose it must be noted that it would also offer a substantial theoretical template of analysis of the Soviet case with which Orwell was to engage critically from around 1944 until the moment of his death.⁵ Burnham's theory of the "managerial revolution" would provide a powerful speculative referent which, on Orwell's reading, would problematise rather than merely cancel out, the Trotskyist paradigm of interpretation (namely, the idea of a "betrayal of the revolution").⁶

Burnham's book *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) was his first – and most important – theoretical pronouncement after his break with Marxism in 1940,⁷ and a direct emanation from his earlier criticism of mainstream Trotskyist analyses of the Soviet Union. In this essay, Burnham propounded a new paradigm of social revolution – historically on a par with earlier systemic transitions – and predicated it on a series of contemporaneous socio-political formations without a strict "formal identity" among themselves, yet with a clear structural commitment to the same historical goal (however "differing in their stage of development as well as in their local background").⁸ These formations or ideologies included Nazism, Bolshevism (or at any rate, the particular inflection of Bolshevism embodied by the USSR) and American New Dealism (which represented a "primitive" stage of managerialism).

⁵ Although as the abovementioned article of 1941 and his own definition of "oligarchical collectivism" suggest, Orwell had been aware of these debates for some time.

⁶ As Alex Zwerdling has noted, "*The Revolution Betrayed* helped Orwell to connect his experience in Spain with what was happening in the Soviet Union and Germany... Trotsky analyzes the revival of bourgeois habits and privileges in postrevolutionary Russia in passages that could well have reminded Orwell of his return to Barcelona after fighting at the front.", Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 86-87

⁷ James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945 [1941])

⁸ James Burnham, "The Theory of the Managerial Revolution", in Ernest E. Haberkern and Arthur Lipow, *ibid.*, 41

The managerial revolution constituted a systemic shift of power, affecting nations on a global scale (and therefore, unrestricted to those three archetypes), from the traditional capitalist class to a new hegemonic class of the managers. The rise of management as a distinct and specific social grouping was explicated as a function of the exponential complexification of the productive process in the modern era, and more crucially, of the increasing advance of new types of effective control (other than traditional property rights) over the instruments of production.⁹ According to Burnham, the extension of public ownership under different guises paved the way for the irreversible takeover: “[t]he economic framework in which this social dominance of the managers will be assured is based upon the state ownership of the major instruments of production. Within this framework there will be no direct property rights in the major instruments of production vested in individuals as individuals”,¹⁰ but rather in a social group which, by virtue of its cooptation of the state, would be placed in a ruling position. This line of argumentation developed, in a sense, Burnham’s earlier postulation of the state as the critical sphere of definition of Soviet society. Its relative autonomy from property relations circumscribed power, and consequently, the subordinated or hegemonic status of any given class, to its position vis-à-vis the state. With the rise of a class “cut out” for an organic relationship to the state machinery, power was automatically subsumed within its domain and the subaltern position of the other classes was naturalised.

Whilst acknowledging the sociological originality and insightfulness of this line of inquiry (which provided some theoretical guidelines for his own engagement with

⁹ “Fascist and communist ideologies denounce in the same words the “chaos” and “anarchy” of capitalism. They conceive of the organization of the state of the future, their state, exactly along the lines on which a manager, an engineer, organizes a factory; that is, their conception of the state is as a social extension generalized from managerial experience.”, James Burnham, *Managerial Revolution*, 167

¹⁰ Burnham, *ibid.*, 64

totalitarian realities), Orwell remained, on the whole, sceptical of the ethico-political corollary to be derived from Burnham's theses. Writing in his *Tribune* column "As I Please" in January 1944, Orwell notes that:

[T]he basic error of this school of thought is its contempt for the common man. A totalitarian society, it is felt, *must* be stronger than a democratic one: the expert's opinion *must* be worth more than the ordinary man's. The German army had won the first battles: therefore it must win the last one. The great strength of democracy, its power of criticism, was ignored... Where Burnham and his fellow-thinkers are wrong is in trying to spread the idea that totalitarianism is *unavoidable*, and that we must therefore do nothing to oppose it.¹¹

Thus the arid conclusiveness of the managerial thesis, whilst partially illuminating a structural aspect of totalitarian societies, failed to engage its subject on the level of agency and oppositionality and consequently, on that of politics itself. Ultimately, the Burnhamian thesis suggested a desertion of the realm of possibility and an apocalyptic surrender of human action to the play of larger-than-life forces and invariably corrupt sets of interests.

Burnham's next book, *The Machiavellians*, further rationalised the assumption that human progress was unattainable (if not aporetic) and that the exercise of power was by definition confined to the exploitative monopoly of oligarchies.¹² As Orwell added in his "Second Thoughts on James Burnham":

¹¹ George Orwell, "As I Please" [14 January 1944], in Peter Davison (ed.), *I Have Tried to Tell the Truth 1943-1944: The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 61

¹² James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (Washington: Gateway, 1987 [1943]). See George Orwell, "Review of Burnham's *The Machiavellians*", in Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 72-74

[W]hat Burnham is mainly concerned to show is that a democratic society has never existed and, so far as we can see, never will exist. Society is of its nature oligarchical, and the power of the oligarchy always rests upon force and fraud... All historical changes finally boil down to the replacement of one ruling class by another. All talk about democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity, all revolutionary movements, all visions of Utopia... are humbug... covering the ambitions of some new class which is elbowing its way into power.¹³

As a descriptive exercise of the dynamics of Soviet statesmanship – Orwell conceded in 1946 – Burnham’s position was accurate enough: “[e]vidently the USSR is not Socialist, and can only be called Socialist if one gives the word a meaning different from what it would have in any other context. On the other hand, prophecies that the Russian regime would revert to capitalism have always been falsified, and now seem further than ever from being fulfilled”.¹⁴ However, “[t]he real question is not whether the people who wipe their boots on us during the next fifty years are to be called managers, bureaucrats, or politicians: *the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy*”.¹⁵

The pitfall in Burnham’s epistemology sprang from a blind endorsement of the logic of unchecked power – an inclination to credit totalitarian arrangements with the infallibility of superior organisation combined with a refusal to countenance resistance as an alternative scenario. The paradoxical terminus of Burnhamian reasoning was therefore convergence with, rather than distancing from, a totalitarian paradigm of utter

¹³George Orwell, “Second Thoughts on James Burnham”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *Smothered Under Journalism (1946): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 269

¹⁴Orwell, *ibid.*, 272

¹⁵Orwell, *ibid.*, 272. My emphasis

political stasis. By 1947, in a book entitled *The Struggle for the World*, Burnham had painted a bleak portrait which to some extent prefigured the hopeless state of affairs of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. A world divided into two power blocks mired in a perpetual yet inconclusive state of war, each of them vying for total domination: “[w]e have entered a period of history during which the attempt is to be made to organize world dominion, a World Empire. There are, however, only two power-groupings capable of making the attempt seriously: one led by Communism with its Soviet base, and the other potentially under United States leadership.”¹⁶

As Orwell observed, Soviet Communism’s anti-political drift¹⁷ was consistently replicated in Burnham’s general picture rather than effectively countered. His bid to consolidate the American lead in the world imperial race further entailed a number of practical measures – notably, the suppression of the American Communist Party – which unmistakably pointed towards a close identification with the totalitarian ethos.¹⁸ The capture of total power remained the exclusive horizon of political initiative, hence ruling out the possibility of securing a democratic (socialist) third space between the US and the USSR:

Meanwhile there is one other solution which is at any rate thinkable, and which Burnham dismisses almost unmentioned. That is, somewhere or other – not in Norway or New Zealand, but over a large area – [how] to make democratic Socialism work. If one could somewhere present the spectacle of

¹⁶ James Burnham, *The Struggle for the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), 150

¹⁷ “Communism is not in the ordinary sense a political movement: it is a world-wide conspiratorial movement for the capture of power. Its aim is to establish everywhere a system similar to that which prevails in Soviet Russia – that is, a system which is technically collectivist, but which concentrates all power in a very few hands, is based on forced labour, and eliminates all real or imaginary opponents by means of terrorism.”, George Orwell, “Burnham’s view of the contemporary world struggle”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *It Is What I Think (1947-1948): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 97

¹⁸ “Burnham is in favour of suppressing the American Communist Party, and of doing the job thoroughly, which would probably mean using the same methods as the Communists, when in power, use against their opponents.”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 102

economic security without concentration camps, the pretext for the Russian dictatorship would disappear and Communism would lose much of its appeal. But the only feasible area is western Europe plus Africa. The idea of forming this vast territory into a Socialist United States has as yet hardly gained any ground, and the practical and psychological difficulties in the way are enormous. Still, it is a *possible* project if people really wanted it, and if there were ten or twenty years of assured peace in which to bring it about.¹⁹

Orwell's project in his final years can be accurately described as a strenuous attempt to negotiate a way between this possibilistic projection of a vast and enduring third camp between the Soviet and American binomial – between Eurasia and Oceania, in the notation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the one hand, and the particular circumstances of post-war Britain and Europe, on the other. The paradoxical nature of this negotiation would usher in a split analysis alternating between a critical yet often emphatic support for the Labour government and a continuing adherence to the idea of a Socialist United States of Europe.

Meanwhile, the denunciation of the Soviet *mythos* remained an integral element of Orwell's programmatic alternative to Burnham's worldview. *Animal Farm* remains perhaps the best-known link in this "deconstructive" chain. As famously noted in his preface to the Ukrainian edition of 1947, "nothing has contributed so much to the corruption of the original idea of Socialism as the belief that Russia is a Socialist country and that every act of its rulers must be excused, if not imitated. And so for the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was

¹⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 103

essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement.”²⁰ The little fable thus proceeded to rewrite the narrative of revolutionary betrayal in simple, allegorical terms. The story’s time-frame was decidedly marked by the momentous developments taking place on the Allied camp at the time of writing – most notably, in what represented perhaps the climax in the logic of cooptation by bureaucratic rule, the fable concluded with a memorable interpretation of the Tehran conference in 1943 (“which everybody thought had established the best possible relations between the USSR and the West. I personally did not believe that such good relations would last long; and as events have shown, I wasn’t far wrong”).²¹

The strategic rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the West completed a long process of adulteration of the egalitarian promise of 1917. Perhaps its most significant step, earlier in 1943, had been the dissolution of the Communist International – the unequivocal sign, in Orwell’s view, that the willed identification of the Soviet “pigs” with their erstwhile oppressors, the capitalist powers, was underway. As he observed in his London Letter of 23 May to *Partisan Review*: “one has got to consider the effect on the working class membership, who have a different outlook from the salaried hacks at the top of the party. To these people the open declaration that the International is dead must make a difference”.²² Despite the enormity of the deception, the naked sight of collaboration with the class enemy – Orwell surmised – could not fail to draw a sincere expression of horror (such as the horse’s neighing at the sight of a pig walking on its hind legs) from the disillusioned proletariat.

²⁰ Orwell, “Preface to the Ukrainian Edition of *Animal Farm*”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 88.

²¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 89

²² George Orwell, “London Letter” [24 May 1943], in Peter Davison (ed.), *Two Wasted Years (1943): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 107

An indication of the degree of formal convergence – or at least, collusion – achieved by the Allied Powers during 1942-1943 and in particular, of the novel status accorded in official political discourse to the Soviet Union, is given by Paul Addison in his description of joint celebrations held in London to mark the first anniversary of the Russo-British alliance:

[A] demonstration and pageant were arranged at the Empress Hall, Earls Court, in June 1942. Of the three bodies which organized the meeting two – the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid, and the Russia Today Society – were under Communist direction. The collection appeal was by the Communist Pat Sloan, and the script of the pageant was the work of another Communist, Montagu Slater. But the chairman of the meeting was the Bishop of Chelmsford, music by the band of the Coldstream Guards, and the main speaker was Cripps, a member of the War Cabinet. ‘May God bless Russia’, said the Bishop, extending the Popular Front to heaven itself.²³

The assumed exigencies of military co-operation and the prevalent mood of ideological whitewashing to which the Stalin regime was consequently subjected were to stand directly in the path of Orwell’s attempts to publish *Animal Farm* throughout 1944.²⁴

The book utilised a satirical lens filtering the developments of Soviet policy from the October Revolution (the overthrow of Jones, the human master of the Manor Farm), through the Civil War (emblematised by the “Battle of the Cowshed” between the “Red Army” of the animals led by Snowball and the “White Army” of the farmers), the Kronstadt uprising (partly suggested by the short-lived hens’ rebellion),²⁵ the Stalin-

²³ Addison, *ibid.*, 138

²⁴ For an overview of the editorial history of the *Animal Farm* manuscript, see Bernard Crick, *ibid.*, esp. 310-317

²⁵ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 66-67

Trotsky split,²⁶ the subsequent Show Trials and executions of the Old Bolsheviks of the mid and late 1930s, the shifting policies of the Comintern (from the Third Period doctrine to the Popular Front – i.e. from isolationism to co-operation with the farmers), to the final alliance with capitalist powers and the suggestion of a rising “iron curtain” of distrust and escalating tensions. Most significantly, Orwell fused basic elements of the Trotskyist analysis (such as the opportunistic manipulation of a disarmed and increasingly alienated proletarian mass by the bureaucracy, in combination with a gradual dismantling of the revolutionary élite)²⁷ with a farther-reaching critique of the Bolsheviks’ avant-gardism and theory of the Party.

In his description of the self-appointment of the pigs as the new power group – indeed as a new class consolidated on the basis of new relations of production vis-à-vis the other animal “classes” (the configuration of the pigs as “brainworkers”) – Orwell hints at the analysis later popularised by the Yugoslav Marxist and dissident Milovan Djilas in his book *The New Class*.²⁸ According to Djilas, what distinguished this new social class of bureaucratic revolutionaries was its *post hoc* genesis: “[i]n earlier epochs the coming to power of some class, some part of a class, or of some party, was the final event resulting from its formation and its development. The reverse was true in the USSR. There the new class was definitely formed after it attained power.”²⁹ Similarly, the pigs’ rise to social hegemony results from their acquired role as intellectual and

²⁶ Complete with denunciations of Snowball’s “treachery” in a clear allusion to the anti-POUM campaigns of the Spanish Civil War: “Snowball was in league with Jones’s secret agent all the time. It has all been proved by documents which he left behind him and which we have only just discovered. To my mind this explains a great deal, comrades. Did we not see for ourselves how he attempted – fortunately without success – to get us defeated and destroyed at the Battle of the Cowshed?”, Orwell, *ibid.*, 69

²⁷ “The bureaucracy struck while the iron was hot, exploiting the bewilderment and passivity of the workers, setting their more backward strata against the advanced, and relying more and more boldly upon the kulak and the petty bourgeois ally in general. In the course of a few years, the bureaucracy thus shattered the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat.”, Trotsky, *ibid.*, 92

²⁸ Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957)

²⁹ Djilas, *ibid.*, 38

practical leaders in the original rebellion, the ensuing corruption of the egalitarian impulse therefore developing from, rather than contradicting, the shared position of privilege accorded to the revolutionary vanguard. In that sense, the stealing of the milk and apples by the pigs and the veil of deception with which this initial “qualification” of the principles of Animalism is covered,³⁰ plants the seeds of betrayal which will ultimately climax in the declaration (under Napoleon’s Thermidorian rule) that “all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”.³¹

What is at stake in this reading is the problematical political status of the Leninist paradigm of revolution and its theoretical and strategic dependence on the vanguard party. Orwell’s criticism seems to move on this particular point beyond an otherwise loosely Trotskyist impeachment of the Revolution’s bureaucratic drift,³² towards a general consideration of the nature of political activity and the inherent pitfalls of a Bolshevik-style approach.³³ The initial co-optation of the state apparatus by an “advanced” social group implied a desertion of the field of politics itself through a monological inscription of power under a unitary sign (the Party). This overconcentration of power in the exclusive hold of a minority represents a critical step towards both the consolidation of arbitrary rule and the unremitting assault upon the

³⁰ Orwell, *ibid.*, 24, 32

³¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 114

³² It is perhaps worth recording that T.S. Eliot’s conservative reading of the story was especially – and characteristically – critical of this aspect: Orwell’s (allegedly) overruling concern with egalitarianism as against the meritocratic advantage asserted by the pigs: “Now I think that my own dissatisfaction with this apologue is that the effect is simply one of negation. It ought to excite some sympathy with what the author wants, as well as sympathy with his objections to something; and the positive point of view, which I take to be generally Trotskyite, is not convincing. I think you split your vote, without getting any compensating stronger adhesion from either party – i.e. those who criticise Russian tendencies from the point of view of a purer communism, and those who, from a very different point of view, are alarmed about the future of small nations. And after all, your pigs are far more intelligent than the other animals, and therefore the best qualified to run the farm – in fact, there couldn’t have been an Animal Farm at all without them: so that what was needed (someone might argue), was not more communism but more public-spirited pigs.”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *I Have Tried to Tell the Truth (1943-44): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 283

³³ As Philip Bounds has noted: “Orwell seemed largely unwilling to divide the history of modern socialism into a prelapsarian Leninist phase and a brutally degraded Stalinist phase.” Philip Bounds, *Orwell and Marxism: The Political and Cultural Thinking of George Orwell* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2009), 141

egalitarian ideal which underpinned Orwell's concept of Democratic Socialism.³⁴ As A.J. Polan has observed apropos of the political model delineated in Lenin's *The State and the Revolution*, "[a] concept of politics as identical with the issue of the possession of state power must of course abolish politics as activity and replace it with politics as apparatus":

The problem of the simple state of Lenin's model, simply put, is that the fewer institutions there are that make up the body politic, the greater the proportion of the total sum of power that will be lodged in each institution. If these institutions are reduced to one, or to a set of institutions that are not significantly separated, power is unitary, not distributed. This, then, is the negation of the field of democratic politics.³⁵

Herein lies perhaps the conceptual link between the narrative imaginaries of *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and what could be defined as Orwell's positive programme for radical social transformation in his final years. This negation or desertion of the political is, properly speaking, the defining trait of the totalitarian situation:³⁶ a radical move towards an undifferentiated sphere in which the conventional distinction between public and private collapses and where modern conceptions of the social are brutally dismantled.

As Seyla Benhabib has pointed out, "[t]otalitarianism has no spatial topology: it is like an iron band, compressing people increasingly together until they are formed into

³⁴ Indeed, as Morris Dickstein has pointed out: "[e]ven at the height of his campaign against totalitarianism, Orwell never gave up his belief in the egalitarian socialism outlined by the old Major and briefly achieved at Animal Farm", "*Animal Farm*: history as fable", in John Rodden (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2007), 139

³⁵ A.J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984), 3, 128

³⁶ Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 156

one.”³⁷ The process of extreme isolation from the social body to which the individual is subjected under totalitarianism (the paradigm of which is the camp – “the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power”) is correlated with a fundamental dismantling of autonomous (that is, extraneous to the control of the State) social activity. The consequence of this dual process is the rise of an amorphous “mass” whose functional status is, as a result, abjectly contingent on the specific organisational role of the State. Hannah Arendt identified the two experiential marks of totalitarianism as being “loneliness” and “worldlessness”:

Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government... is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.³⁸

Thus the operative principle of totalitarian rule is the destruction of the individual’s moorings in the community: first, through the radical shattering of its “being-in-the-world” and second, through its reconfiguration within a disarticulated aggregate which can no longer recognise itself amongst the republican species of citizenship and *peuple*. In this particular sense, as Benhabib observes, “the mob” (that pre-political object of polemical representation) “is the precursor of the lonely masses of totalitarianism”.³⁹ The lack which these masses share with the pre-modern mob is one of public projection

³⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1996), 73

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, quoted in Benhabib, *ibid.*, 67

³⁹ Benhabib, *ibid.*, 66

and articulate common experience. Yet in the later situation, the privation arises from a thoroughly deliberate assault upon the fabric of political activity itself. In the words of Michael Halberstam, “[t]otalitarianism does not politicize all areas of life. It has no public sphere at all in which persons can encounter one another and, therefore, closes them off from a world of shared experience altogether.”⁴⁰

This characteristically modern desertion or exhaustion of “experience” as such – a derivative, we could say, of totalitarianism’s renunciation of politics – is precisely what concerns Orwell in the passage from the didactic mode of *Animal Farm* to the eschatological universe of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For indeed the world of Oceania, Ingsoc and Big Brother, is characterised, primarily, by a radical renunciation of experience at both the individual and collective levels.⁴¹ The resulting effect has often been interpreted as one of “despair” or “disillusion” in a conditioned – and sometimes indiscriminating – reading of the author’s latter-day politics.⁴² However, this overall effect – even if granted – cannot be disengaged from the more general reflection on totalitarianism as a specific challenge to Orwell’s idiosyncratic conception of Socialism. The problem of experience features prominently in this conception as it centrally weaves the individual and collective dimensions of any possible blueprint for a liberated community. In that sense, the disabled life-world of Winston Smith and Julia (especially

⁴⁰ Halberstam, *ibid.*, 174

⁴¹ This desertion or renunciation is typically correlated, in the totalitarian situation, with an inducement to experience collectively and vicariously. The spectacularity of power under totalitarianism is characteristically offered as a mass-substitute for individual and interpersonal experience. As Aneurin Bevan observes: “[w]hen the ordinary man and woman is disenfranchised, as in the dictatorship countries, the emphasis on the public spectacle is still greater. Consumption by pageantry takes the place of private consumption... The well-known bellicosity of dictatorships is therefore fed by a morbid desire for the enjoyment of vicarious power by the politically helpless masses. It is not only that coercion and bullying come easily to those who have climbed to power by these means and who maintain themselves there by similar methods: it is also because the whole social psychology of such communities is perverted by the horrible contrast between individual weakness on the one hand and the pomp of unbridled power on the other.”, Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London: Quartet Books, 1978 [1952]), 201. Notice how the official orchestration, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of a daily “two minutes’ hate” directed against Big Brother’s arch-enemy, Goldstein, neatly illustrates Bevan’s point.

⁴² See, for example, Alok Rai, *Orwell and the Politics of Despair* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1988) and Isaac Deutscher, “The Mysticism of Cruelty” in *Heretics and Renegades* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969)

that of Winston) is a condensation of features pointing in the direction of experiential deprivation and therefore signalling the human end-products of a *completed* (and therefore hypothetical)⁴³ process of political, social, psychological and moral devastation.

The question of affect as articulated in the novel is perhaps most interesting as a paradigmatic expression of this total devastation. It has also been one of the prime targets of critics who have discerned, in the barren human world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s interpersonal relations, a suspect exclusion of the more liberating alternatives inherent in ordinary affective attachments. Raymond Williams in particular has pinpointed this aspect of the novel as its deepest failure: "[i]t is strange that Orwell could oppose the controls and the perversions with nothing better than the casual affair between Winston and Julia... It is not the ordinary and continuing love of men and women, in friendship and in marriage, but a willed corruption or indifference...that is presented as opposed to... that joyless world"⁴⁴ The mechanical ritual of sex between Winston and Julia becomes associated with an impoverished and essentially misogynistic conception of rebellion as debased compulsion. In this respect, the characterisation of Julia in particular is no doubt problematical: it suggests, even under conditions of extreme dehumanisation, a persisting sexual division of labour whereby the function of ideological opposition is placed under a gender differential. Cast in this light, Julia is essentially a rebel "from the waist downwards", incapable of sustaining a discursive line of antagonism and eminently shallow in her generally "practical orientation".⁴⁵

⁴³ It is necessary to insist that Orwell did not present his novel as a prediction, but as a warning against a possible development and corruption of the Socialist idea.

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *Orwell* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1971), 80-81

⁴⁵ "Throughout the novel the contrast is drawn between Winston's attempt to understand his society and Julia's purely practical orientation: She is cunning, capable, mechanically oriented... and hedonistic,

It is nevertheless necessary to situate the particular elements of this broad characterisation within the purposive frame of the novel's dystopian lesson. And in that sense, the moral frailty which is ultimately the defining trait of this human world amounts to the exhaustion of experience to which the Party subjects its outer members. The immediate effects of panoptical surveillance, linguistic distortion (through the "revolutionary" codification of thought in Newspeak), and the total deregulation of power – which becomes a tautological and self-serving aim – are channelled towards the complete annihilation of human experience qua moral intelligibility of the world.⁴⁶ Viewed in this light, Winston's negative resistance is waged in the only terms available to those who have been rendered inhuman through the normalisation of the "state of exception". Refusal of experience and abolition of the ordinary affects of interpersonal relations, in the sense suggested by Williams, seem to be the only remaining strategies of physical continuity (perhaps the word "survival" is excessive in this context) for the inhabitants of this desecrated social space ("We are the dead. Our only true life is in the future").⁴⁷ In the words of Giorgio Agamben: "[w]hen humankind is deprived of effective experience and becomes subjected to the imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats – in other words, when the only possible experience is horror and lies – then the rejection of experience can provisionally embody a legitimate defence."⁴⁸

unanalytical, opportunistic. Winston's strenuous resistance to O'Brien's torture is depicted in great detail, but we are told in passing that Julia had capitulated at once to O'Brien's methods.", Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 245

⁴⁶ "Human personality, as we have come to grasp for it in a class society and hope for it in a classless society, is obliterated; man becomes a function of a process he is never allowed to understand or control. The fetishism [sic] of the state replaces the fetishism of commodities.", Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1957])

⁴⁷ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1949]), 203-204

⁴⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007 [1978]), 18

The resilient consciousness which pits Winston against the colossal machinery of the Party – and which ultimately singles him out as the distinguished focus of O’Brien’s interest – is punctuated by the fundamental contrast between the caste of ex-humans to which he belongs and the allegedly unconscious mass of the proles:

They [the people of previous ages] were governed by private loyalties which they did not question. What mattered were individual relationships, and a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself. The proles, it suddenly occurred to him, had remained in this condition. They were not loyal to a party or a country or an idea, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them merely as an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside. They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to re-learn by conscious effort.⁴⁹

By consigning hope (however vague and unrealised its promise in the final reckoning) to the proles as the legitimate representatives of an enslaved humanity still in possession of the moral ingredients of emancipation, the novel draws a dividing line between the projection of complete devastation (the finalised image of life after totalitarian victory) and the inexhaustible reservoir of potential inscribed in the living idea of equality. Again, equality provides both the redemptive horizon and the vehicle for a future resurrection of human life as obliquely suggested by the raw vital rhythms of the proles. Equality provides the *élan* for the final quoted passage of Goldstein’s book, posing the ever-recurring Orwellian question which, beyond the particular dynamics of Oceanian society as described in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical*

⁴⁹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 191

Collectivism, holds as a generally valid interrogation of principle: “*why* should human equality be averted? Supposing that the mechanics of the process have been rightly described, what is the motive for this huge, accurately planned effort to freeze history at a particular moment of time?”⁵⁰

Equality, moreover, has a direct physical expression in the wasted figure of a proletarian woman who can have no claim on consciousness (on “mind” in the sense ascribed by Winston’s own tortured mind) yet whose sheer corporeality indicates a continuity – indeed a continuity of experience – which contains the seeds of a future renewal:

The woman down there had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart and a fertile belly. He wondered how many children she had given birth to. It might easily be fifteen. She had had her momentary flowering, a year, perhaps, of wildrose beauty, and then she had suddenly swollen like a fertilised fruit and grown hard and red and coarse, and then her life had been laundering, scrubbing, darning, cooking, sweeping, polishing, mending, scrubbing, laundering, first for children, then for grandchildren, over thirty unbroken years. At the end of it she was still singing.⁵¹

“Where there is equality there can be sanity”, claims Winston. The kind of sanity vindicated by Winston in the figure of the proletarian woman is the precise reverse of

⁵⁰ Orwell, *ibid.*, 225-226

⁵¹ Orwell, *ibid.*, 251. It would be interesting to compare this proletarian impersonation with J.B. Priestley’s similar characterisation in his 1940 *Postscripts* of a Cockney woman, “Two Tonne Annie”, as an emblematic expression of popular resilience during the Blitz: “[s]he exchanged cheerful, insulting remarks with everybody. She was a roaring and indomitable old lioness, and wherever she was carried there was a cheerful tumult; and as she roared out repartee she saluted the grinning crowd like a raffish old empress. Yes; she was old, fat, helplessly lame and was being taken away from her familiar surroundings, a sick woman, far from home. But she gave no sign of any inward distress, but was her grand, uproarious self. She did all our hearts good that day, and I said then that although Britannia can put up a good fight, Two Tonne Annie and all her kind can put up a better one.”, J.B. Priestley, *Postscripts* (London: William Heinemann, 1940). In both cases, a populist vindication of essential humanity supplies the “resources of hope” (Williams) for a fresh rethinking of social equality.

the state of normalised exceptionality achieved at the end of the novel,⁵² as well as the basis for the final duality underpinning its notion of politics. Winston's ultimate characterisation of himself as the "last man in Europe" is attached to a corporeal expression of bare humanity, a degree zero of sanity with an unequivocal physical dimension. Winston's entry into the realm of naked power and normalised exceptionality – into the world of O'Brien's total rule, and the singular juridical space of which he is made out to be the absolute guarantor – marks the completion of a process begun with the symptomatic acceptance of the unbridgeable gulf between "them" and "us", between Party slaves (denizens of a new world without equality) and proles (the residual bearers of a common humanity).

In his definition of the radical anomaly represented by this domain of exceptionality, Orwell approximates one of the paradigmatic theorisations of the modern condition – that of sovereignty understood as a state of exception, and that of *homo sacer* as the novel archetype of "exceptional" humanity.⁵³ According to Agamben, under this new regime, "the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception".⁵⁴ Hence, the camp – that natural habitat of the state of exception, that total space of political annihilation – is revealed as the new "hidden matrix and *nomos*" of

⁵² Andrew Milner has pertinently observed that the novel does not conclude where the main narration does. Indeed, "the novel actually continues, in my edition for over fourteen pages, until the conclusion to the *Appendix* on Newspeak... In content, these lines add little, but their form is redolent with meaning." Milner quotes Margaret Atwood to the effect that the *Appendix* "is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived. For whoever has written the essay on Newspeak, the world of 1984 is

over", Andrew Milner, "Archaeologies of Science Fiction: Jameson's Utopia or Orwell's Dystopia" (2007) <http://arts.monash.edu.au/cclcs/research/papers/archaeologies.pdf>, 12-13. See also Thomas Pynchon, "Introduction", in Orwell, *ibid.*, xxiii

⁵³ The *locus classicus* of the modern theory of sovereignty is, of course, Carl Schmitt. See his *The Concept of the Political*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007 [1932]) and *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006 [1922]). See also Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2009 [2000]), 36-59

⁵⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 170

political space itself: “[t]hat is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen”.⁵⁵ Or, in the “didactic” mode mastered by O’Brien as he presents Winston with his own bare humanity after prolonged torture: “[w]hat are you? A bag of filth. Now turn round and look into that mirror again. Do you see that thing facing you? That is the last man. If you are human, that is humanity”.⁵⁶

Nineteen Eighty-Four draws a falling trajectory of political life from the raw materials of a totalitarian dismantling of politics to the actualisation of that dismantling. What is acknowledged in the process is the insoluble antagonism between “sovereign power”, understood as the normalisation or naturalisation of the state of exception, and equality as the conceptual basis of political activity as struggle and emancipation. It is worth conceding – at least partially – the point made by Williams in his overall characterisation of Orwell’s Socialism, when he claims that “Socialism was a general idea, a general name, against all these evils [fascism, imperialism and inequality].”⁵⁷ Yet it is necessary to stress, especially in a discussion of his later work, the positive content that this nominal commitment to Socialism actually had.

The singularity of his politics resides in an overarching moral commitment – which, after Spain, becomes *axiomatic* and not merely hypothetical – to the egalitarian transformation of society – a prioritisation of collective possibilities in the face of conjunctural threats (the failure of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the rise of new bureaucratic oligarchies). This often resulted, as we have seen, in a tactical modulation of revolutionary or reformist emphases which typically led in apparently contradictory and opportunistic directions. Admittedly, the programmatic articulation of his political

⁵⁵ Agamben, *ibid.*, 171

⁵⁶ Orwell, *ibid.*, 312

⁵⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 55

ideas underwent, in the temporal arc we have covered, a *substantive* shift from semi-Trotskyist positions to a more or less recognisably “Bevanite” or left-Labourite stance. But explanations of this evolution in terms of Cold War defection or even “hysteria” must be rejected instantly as they fail to pin down the actual imbrication of moral priorities and contextual limitations – both of which derive from a fundamental sense of experiential immediacy (ultimately harking back to the Spanish Civil War).

Thus, the Socialist continuities in Orwell’s work must be mediated, crucially, by the circumstances of lived History. His later preoccupation with totalitarian realities – and with a less defined and more intuitive notion of “equality” (especially when compared to the paradigm developed in *Homage to Catalonia*) – is not post- or ex-Socialist,⁵⁸ but rather consistent with his recognition of transformative possibilities in the conjuncture of “1940”. The contextual exigencies of the post-war period, after the replacement of the Fascist menace with the Iron Curtain, necessarily required, in accordance with the moral prioritisation of equality, a retrenchment from revolutionary tactics along the lines of a Democratic-Socialist enfranchisement of the popular majority. The practical tensions of this conjuncture are evident and indisputable ingredients of the doctrinal make-up of the later Orwell. Thus the almost defensive tone of an article such as “The Labour Government After Three Years” (published in October 1948, at the critical moment of “consolidation” of Labour’s reforms after the radical moves of the three preceding years)⁵⁹ contrasts with the irrepressible utopian content of a piece like “Towards European Unity” (July-August 1947), with its integral

⁵⁸ As Raymond Williams, in a rather diabling gesture, went on to suggest. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 390

⁵⁹ George Orwell, “The Labour Government After Three Years”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *It Is What I Think (1947-1948): The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 435-444

Socialist vision premised on equality and committed, not to the surrender of the political language of alternatives and possibilities, but to its principled projection and realisation.

“The Labour Government After Three Years” is, as John Newsinger has pointed out, “probably the closest we get with Orwell to a full-blooded endorsement of British Labourism and its reformist politics”.⁶⁰ In particular, it is an expression of obdurate “realism” – of politics as the “language of priorities” – deriving its strength of commitment from an overarching concern with the egalitarian fruits to be derived at every gradual step down the road towards Democratic Socialism. Yet if this provides the immediate practical horizon of social transformation in the Britain of the late forties, the position outlined in “Toward European Unity” offers a principled projection of Socialism as both a general characterisation and a particular counter to the totalitarian menace. The only way of avoiding the devastating imaginings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and of Burnham’s predictions, “is to present somewhere or other, on a large scale, the spectacle of a community where people are relatively free and happy and where the main motive in life is not the pursuit of money or power. In other words, democratic socialism must be made to work throughout some large area”.⁶¹

The historical limitations imposed upon an emancipatory project conjugated in the moral *language* of equality and possibility as partially realised in the “exceptional” circumstances of libertarian Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War are manifest in the Orwell of the late 1940s. An enduring loyalty to the said language is thus tempered by the strict constraints of the post-war British situation and crucially, by the unremitting onslaught of a menace “internal” to the Left – that of “oligarchical collectivism”.

⁶⁰ Newsinger, *ibid.*, 138

⁶¹ George Orwell, “Towards European Unity”, in Peter Davison (ed.), *ibid.*, 164

The practical scope of this political realisation is thus, in a certain sense, fundamentally compromised (just as it had originally been fuelled) by its ascription to a narrow conjuncture. The *resources of possibility* – the imagination of radical social change – which had animated his initial engagement with Socialism are thus ultimately contained within topical forms (POUMism, the “spirit of Dunkirk”, Bevanism) which may potentially deprive them of a more general exploration of alternatives to the hegemonic system of relations. Thus, the alter-systemic possibilities inscribed even in the bleakest of “dystopian” narratives – *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – are ultimately subordinated to a contextual dependency on the affirmations of Labour’s reformist programme. In other words, the utopian “obverse” to the world of Oceania is not Burnham’s American Empire, but the “third road” represented by the Left of the Labour Party. And the limiting effects of this ascription are to be found in the narrowing-down of symbolic references to the reconstructive scope of a parliamentary option.⁶²

Our next step will be to take up the genealogy of Socialism at a different, yet complementary point. For the vexed history of British Communism, over the same period when Orwell was constructing his negative paradigm of “oligarchical collectivism”, showcases an internal evolution of gathering dissidence whose range of political imagination, as we will see, extends the performative scope of Orwell’s emancipatory vision beyond the topical range of an institutional alternative.

⁶² For a classic analysis of this “narrow” outlook of British Labourism, see Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: a Study in the Politics of Labour* (London: Merlin Press, 1973)

PART TWO

E.P. THOMPSON: HISTORY AND HUMANISM

1. Communism with a British Face: Politics, History and Culture

The events of 1945 dawned upon British Communists as a remarkable opportunity for the international expansion of Socialism and for their Party's consolidation as a beacon of progress within the Labour Movement. Even if the membership figures of 1942-43 were to remain unmatched in later years, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) still managed to bask for some time in the reflected glory accrued by its Soviet mentor in the recent struggle against Hitler.¹

Following a series of ineffectual attempts at affiliation with the Labour Party, Communists propounded (although to no avail) a broad electoral pact of all progressive forces on 2 October 1944. The General Election of July 1945 would nevertheless leave a bittersweet taste amongst Party ranks: despite the clear swing to the left signalled by Labour's landslide victory, only two MPs – out of the 22 candidates put up by the Communist Party – were returned to Westminster: Willie Gallacher for the West Fife constituency and Phil Piratin for Mile End, while the Party General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, was narrowly defeated in East Rhondda.² As Willie Thompson has noted, however, whatever the degree of their disappointment, “British communists did not doubt that the wider world, Europe and Britain were all set for an epoch of progressive social advance in which they would fully participate.”³ In this spirit, they continued to

¹ Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 116

² Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 122

³ Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 74

seek affiliation with the matrix organisation of the British Labour Movement as it set out to implement its programme of radical reform. Pollitt wrote to Labour's General Secretary Morgan Phillips requesting that their application be reconsidered. Despite significant support for this initiative from numerous constituency parties, the National Executive Committee remained determined to prevent Communist infiltration of its political structure. A denunciatory pamphlet by Harold Laski was released shortly before Labour's 1946 conference, detailing aspects of the CPGB's strategic opportunism (which Laski identified with the Comintern doctrine of class collaboration) and thus pre-emptively expressing official Labour views on any future attempts at affiliation.⁴ Phillips argued a similar line, presenting the case as a matter of survival for the Labour Party and its autonomous programme of "Democratic Socialism": "[i]f the Communist affiliation was foolishly granted the position would be intolerable. There would be within our Party another highly organised Party working for its own supremacy. Every local Labour Party would become a battle ground for democratic socialism vs. communism."⁵

The Communist bid was eventually defeated by 2,675,000 to 468,000 votes in June 1946.⁶ Additionally, the annual conference passed a resolution permanently forbidding the affiliation of any organisation "with its own rules and constitution" that was not already affiliated by 1 January 1946.⁷ In spite of these organisational setbacks, which would indubitably condition Communist activity in years to follow, the Party could still boast a relatively strong position amongst the industrial workforce. This stemmed from a fundamental commitment to workplace economic struggles which

⁴ Harold Laski, *The Secret Battalion: An Examination of the Communist Attitude to the Labour Party* (London: Labour Party, 1946)

⁵ Quoted in Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 123

⁶ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 123

⁷ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 124

often went counter to the mood of co-operation and acquiescence between the unions and the Labour government. As Richard Stevens has pointed out, “Communist influence in the unions was primarily built on such struggles and the willingness of CP members to take on leadership roles and risk victimization. This explains the resilience of the CP in the unions during the sharpest phase of the Cold War from 1948 to 1953.”⁸

During the early phase of the first Attlee government, between 1945 and 1947, the CPGB was faced with something of an identity crisis: its principled determination to support the government’s reforms as a “transitional period in the journey to socialism” contrasted with its repeated and failed attempts to affiliate with the Labour Party,⁹ on the one hand, and with its particular project of Socialism (deemed ultimately incompatible with Labour’s), on the other. Thus, the question was asked: “[w]hat should be their own distinctive role? It could not be confined indefinitely to offering ‘critical support’ for the government. It was self-evident that the strategy outlined in *For Soviet Britain* [The Party’s 1935 programme] was obsolete but a good deal less clear what might replace it.”¹⁰

A first step towards the redefinition of the post-war Communist project was already adumbrated in the 1944 pamphlet *Britain for the People: Proposals for Post-war Policy*, which outlined a series of measures considered necessary for the ensuing process of reconstruction. Great emphasis was placed on the maintenance of wartime

⁸ Richard Stevens, “Cold War Politics: Communism and Anti-Communism in the Trade Unions”, in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds.) *The Post-war Compromise: British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics 1945-64* (London: Merlin Press, 2007), 169. Communist influence during this period was indeed notable in some of the major unions, such as the TGWU (historically associated with Ernest Bevin) and somewhat disproportionate to actual percentages. See Stevens, *ibid.*, 175 and Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: the Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: Merlin Press, 1995), 109. Outstanding Communist figures in the movement included Arthur Horner of the National Union of Mineworkers and Bert Papworth, the first Communist ever to sit in the general council of the TUC. Furthermore, Communists were in virtual control of smaller unions such as the FBU, the AEU and the ETU.

⁹ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 125

¹⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 77

controls and the securing of full employment, as well as on the extension of the welfare franchise in consonance with prevalent reformist sentiment on the broad progressive front. Thus, whereas revolutionary change on the Bolshevik model had furnished the strategic basis of the 1935 programme, *Britain for the People* consecrated the Party's turn towards gradualism and acceptance of the constitutional "road to socialism". While the need for extra-parliamentary action was still acknowledged, it was increasingly felt that Parliament could be enlisted, qua democratic institution, in the struggle against capitalism. To this effect, it would be necessary, as Phil Piratin pointed out in 1947, to bring it "closer to the people" or, in other words, to revolutionise its mechanisms of accountability and representation.¹¹ An absolute priority for Communists in this respect was the introduction of proportional representation on the basis of a single transferable vote,¹² in lieu of the much abhorred first-past-the-post system, which continued to hinder the Party's hopes of attaining institutional visibility.¹³

This doctrinal shift away from prior formal aspirations rerouted Marxist-Leninist phraseology from its traditional revolutionary valences to a new supporting role in an overall reformist strategy. Harry Pollitt's 1947 pamphlet *Looking Ahead* was to further articulate this conversion to constitutional methods, endowing it with a historical-theoretical basis. In a chapter entitled "The British Road to Socialism", Pollitt argued that:

Communists have never said that the Russian Revolution of October, 1917, is a model which has exactly to be copied. Indeed, the whole work of Marx and Engels and Lenin and Stalin... has been to explain to the people how to

¹¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 77

¹² Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 124

¹³ Willie Gallacher MP had called for such reforms in the House of Commons as early as February 1944. Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 136

recognise the deep laws of development of society, and to show how the working class and the people can decide on correct slogans and correct programmes based on a study of the economic and social forces at a given time. Communists have always said... that the study of the Russian Revolution and of all previous revolutions... is pregnant with meaning and lessons for the working class. But this does not mean that these lessons must be learnt by heart, or initiated mechanically, or applied at different times and under different conditions.¹⁴

This change of approach to the question of the transition to Socialism was, in effect, coordinate with the renovated spirit of the Party which had emerged from the war. As Francis Beckett has noted, this “was very different from the Party which had been born out of the upheaval of the Great War. In 1920 its leaders were young men who thought the revolution was just round the corner.”¹⁵ By 1945, some of the early British crusaders of internationalist Communism, such as Gallacher (aged 63 at the time), or Pollitt himself, had been tempered into a radical reformulation of their revolutionary vision: “[i]t [still] meant a fundamental change in the way society was run – but it no longer necessarily meant violent overthrow of the state.”¹⁶ For their part, younger members such as Gallacher’s fellow MP, Piratin, derived their brand of Communism from the recent struggles against Fascism, both domestically (fighting Mosley’s Blackshirts) and internationally, through a fundamental association with the USSR and its distinguished contribution to the war.

¹⁴ Harry Pollitt, *Lookin Ahead* (London: CPGB, 1947), 87-88

¹⁵ Beckett, *ibid.*, 108

¹⁶ Beckett, *ibid.*, 108

Even if Labour's reformist agenda was already stalling by 1947 and its programme of Democratic Socialism showing its first signs of weakness,¹⁷ the CPGB failed to capitalise on the governmental deadlock. The rising tide of the Cold War no doubt accounts for its increasingly marginal position in the political spectrum and society at large, turning the Party into a privileged target for anti-Soviet propaganda. The pace of international developments from 1947 onwards is worth examining in some detail for the particular effects it would have within the realm of British Communism. It will be noted that the Party's programmatic distancing from the revolutionary model of 1917, even if it signalled a major and creative attempt to reconcile Communist doctrine with British liberal institutions, was by no means independent from the Moscow line.

Stalin had already disbanded the International founded by Lenin, the Communist International or Comintern in 1943,¹⁸ heralding a new era and strategy of international Communist leadership for the Soviet Union. The Communist Information Bureau or Cominform was created in September 1947 "as an agency for co-ordinating the intransigent propaganda offensive against the West now judged to be necessary."¹⁹ The new agency was formed by Communist Parties already in power – with the exception of Albania's – plus the PCI and PCF.²⁰ Earlier that year, in March 1947, President Truman had outlined his policy of assistance to those governments threatened by "direct or indirect" Communist aggression, an announcement which was followed by the launching of the Marshall Plan or European Recovery Programme. Stalin's response came as the Cominform thesis of the "two camps" into which the post-war world was now reportedly divided: on the one hand, the Soviet-led "democratic anti-imperialist"

¹⁷ See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), esp. 330-408. See also, Jim Fyrth, "Labour's Bright Morning – and Afternoon", in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *Labour's High Noon: The Government and the Economy 1945-51* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993)

¹⁸ See above.

¹⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ The latter was to operate as a liaison to the British Party.

and on the other, “the imperialist anti-democratic”.²¹ This novel doctrinal direction had the immediate effect of heightening the Party’s sensitivity to Labour’s domestic shortcomings (as the increasingly censorious tone of official declarations confirmed),²² as well as intensifying its commitment to Britain’s disengagement from the American sphere of influence. In the words of John Gollan: “the only possible policy open to us is genuine Three-Power co-operation, with the USSR and the USA.”²³ Among other things, this implied boosting Britain’s industrial output without submitting to foreign control in the form of Marshall Aid.

The constitution of the Western European Union’s Defence Organisation in 1948 and of its wider resultant, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in April 1949, was perceived by British Communists as an unequivocal sign of the unrelenting “drift to war” in which the Labour Party had been caught, making it an urgent task for all committed “progressives” to resist this fateful turn of strategy and hence to defend the “lives and liberty of the British people”.²⁴ The escalation of international tensions in 1948 amounted to a series of disappointments for the CPGB and its doctrine of Three-Power co-operation in a context of global peace and British independence. In February 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia staged a coup with Soviet backing, thereby ending a short period of national alliance between left and liberal democratic parties. Later in the same year, Berlin erupted into the first open crisis of the Cold War, with the Soviets blockading the Western sector of the city and Allied forces responding with an airlift which would last until the spring of 1949. However, perhaps the most severe crisis in terms of its symbolic and emotional charge for Communists would

²¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 78-79. This new Soviet “doctrine” was articulated by the Party Secretary Andrei Zhdanov in a secret keynote address at the Polish resort of Szklarska Poręba. See Wojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1996), 30-31

²² Thus, for example: “[t]here is nothing in common with Socialism in what the Labour government is doing”, quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, 79

²³ Quoted in Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 133

²⁴ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 134

arrive in the split between Stalin and Yugoslavia's leader, Tito, soon after the establishment of the Cominform (whose original headquarters had been set up in Belgrade).

Tito's refusal to submit unquestioningly to Moscow's *diktat*, in matters of economic organisation, for example, together with his determination to gain control over the Yugoslav area of influence (which included plans to merge the country with Bulgaria), unleashed a series of tense exchanges between the CPSU and the Yugoslav Party. The rift finally culminated in Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform, upon which the latter's seat was moved to Bucharest, in June 1948.²⁵ British Communists endorsed the official Moscow line, even if this sudden excommunication of Yugoslavia represented a bitter challenge to the faithful. This country's mythopoeic standing in the wartime pantheon of British radicalism is only comparable to that of Spain in the late Thirties. Much of its prestige derived from the relatively unaided Partisan struggle against Axis forces during the war, which had resulted in the almost complete liberation of the territory by mid-1945. In contrast with the royalist Chetnik movement (which would change allegiances to the Axis halfway through the conflict), Partisans were largely characterised by a federation of loyalties – both ethnic/national and political – which in a sense prefigured the idiosyncratic nature of the resulting Yugoslav state.²⁶

As Stephen Woodhams has observed, following Basil Davidson's account, part of the specific attraction exerted by the Yugoslav Partisans lay in their broad social make-

²⁵ For the internal evolution of Yugoslav Communism, see Ivo Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988)

²⁶ Apropos of the peculiar suspension or supersession of Nationalist "desire" effected by the federalist project, and of its conceivable utopianism or failed utopianism, Fredric Jameson has noted that "the failure of federalism to become completely Utopian lies not only in its practical realisability... [i]t lies above all in the absence from it of representation, that is, of the possibility of any powerful libidinal cathexis. Federalism cannot be invested with the desire associated with the lost, indeed the impossible object... Indeed, it would be a matter of great political interest to make an inventory not only of the various lost objects the modern nationalist passions have posited, but also of what happens when federalism works, at least for a time, as in the "former" Yugoslavia." Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 225-226

up: “Communists... were never the dominant force in the movement. Rather the partisans were genuinely a popular front, both in the sense that they enjoyed the support of the majority of the population, the peasantry, and in the sense that they held within their ranks a range of ethnic and political differences”.²⁷

The twin processes of winning the immediate war and of building a new state should not, according to Basil Davidson, be separated, if the actions of the partisans were to be understood... Yugoslavia presented to socialists elsewhere perhaps the best example of a popular struggle organized and carried through by the people. It was a struggle designed not merely to liberate territory from foreign occupation, but to rid themselves of the corrupt pre-war rulers, and the social organization which they had maintained. Yugoslavia epitomized the post-war hopes for the creation of a new society and a new people from the ashes of war.²⁸

British leftwingers had been particularly captivated by this embodied promise of democracy and social transformation, as the creation of the British-Yugoslav Association and the official attachment of prominent CPGB members (such as James Klugmann) to the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia effectively attested. One of the last acts of the British-Yugoslav Association was, tellingly, the publication of a booklet entitled *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* shortly before the Tito-Stalin split in 1948. This slender publication, edited by a young E.P. Thompson in his capacity of

²⁷ Stephen Woodhams, *History in the Making: Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson and Radical Intellectuals, 1936-1956* (London: Merlin Press, 2001), 56. Of course, this notion has been disputed, and it now seems evident in the light of abundant historiography, that Communist leadership was relatively uncontested within the Partisan movement. This does not, however, invalidate the point that the Partisans' strategy rested on a largely anti-sectarian “popular front” which contrasted sharply with the Chetnik movement and its ethnic commitment to the idea of a “Greater Serbia”. See, for example, Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918-2004* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 145-162

²⁸ Woodhams, *ibid.*, 64

Commandant of the British Brigade, recounted the participation of British volunteers in the building of an emblematic railway line (the *Omladinska Pruga* or “Youth Railway”) between Šamac and Sarajevo in 1947. As the preface to the volume explained:

There is nothing very remarkable about this railway... [except for] the way in which it was built. It was not built by underpaid Irish navvies or by unemployed drawn from a pool of “labour reserves”. It was not built slowly, shoddily, and at great expense, by a foreign company, remaining as a tentacle to suck more wealth out of the impoverished peasantry... The construction of the Railway was conceived, executed and carried to a successful completion by the People’s Youth of Yugoslavia.²⁹

This “adventure in construction” epitomised the values which British radicals had customarily read, during the early post-war years, into Yugoslavia’s heroic war experiences. As Thompson remarked in his contribution:

The workers on these projects [meaning the multiple voluntary projects of which the Youth Railway was a foremost instance] were the natural inheritors of the spirit of the partisans... The positive qualities won in those days – the comradeship, self-abnegation and conscious unity – instead of evaporating, as in some other countries, in the swamps of economic anarchy, black-marketeering and renewed disruptions, were carried forward intact into the days of peace.³⁰

The privileged position accorded to Tito’s Yugoslavia in British Communist imaginaries suffered a severe shock after the freezing of relations between Moscow and

²⁹ Edward Thompson (ed.), *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* (London: The British-Yugoslav Association, 1948), vii-viii

³⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 2

Belgrade. As the Party conformed to the new official line, the Yugoslav experiment ceased to garner accolades as a distinguished exemplar of young and resilient Socialism, and came to represent instead – in what was often an uncomfortable doctrinal pirouette for recent adherents to the Yugoslav way – the supreme manifestation of late Stalinist demonology. The official codification in Britain of this latest heresy appeared in 1951 as a Party tract by Klugmann (only recently a vocal supporter of Tito's regime), entitled *From Trotsky to Tito*.³¹ Communist hysteria surrounding the phenomenon of Titoism reached nearly every corner of left-wing dissidence on the domestic and international fronts:

The writings of the Yugoslavs Djilas, Kardelj and Pijade were described as a 'hotch-potch of Trotskyist phrases'. Even Morgan Phillips and Sam Watson, two pillars of the orthodox Labour establishment were 'implicated' in a new world conspiracy by virtue of a five-hour meeting they had held with Tito and his Cabinet. Social democrats, right and left, Titoites, Trotskyists, fascists and American imperialists were all in league, it was alleged.³²

Anti-Titoist purges raged throughout the Soviet bloc, beginning with the show trial of Hungarian Communist leader László Rajk in 1949 and climaxing in the trial of Rudolf Slansky and other prominent members of the Czechoslovak CP in 1952. Klugmann's notorious assessment of the latter was formulated under the title "Lessons of the Prague Trial", a piece which certified the CPGB's continuing endorsement of orthodoxy throughout the Eastern campaign.³³

³¹ James Klugmann, *From Trotsky to Tito* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1951)

³² Mark Jenkins, *Bevanism: Labour's High Tide* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1979), 206

³³ "The use of labour spies and agents provocateurs against the Labour movement is as old as the battle of capital against labour... Slansky was able to place his men – Trotskyists, bourgeois nationalists, Zionists,

It was against this backdrop of high-pitched tension and zeal in the Communist bloc that the British Party's turn to gradualism was consummated. *The British Road to Socialism*, first presented as the Party Programme in January 1951,³⁴ definitively revoked the "Class against Class" approach which underpinned its forerunner of 1935, calling instead for "the peaceful co-existence of socialism and capitalism": "[t]he Communist Party brands as a lie the charge that Communism is to be imposed by aggression and conquest, and declares that social transformation can only come through internal changes in accordance with the actual conditions in each country."³⁵ The preservation of international peace was intimately connected to the safeguarding of Britain's "independence", resulting in a principled defence of Britain's sovereign rights over imperialist (i.e. US) encroachments: "[w]e stand for a Britain, free, strong and independent. We want our country to be subordinate and subservient to no foreign power, but to stand in friendly association and equal alliance with all powers that recognise and respect Britain's national interests."³⁶

The British Road championed the Cominform doctrine of differing national approaches to the transition, ruling out the principle of universal applicability of the Soviet experience with which the Comintern had been associated. Instead, much attention was paid to the alternative model set forth by the young People's Democracies of the Eastern bloc. It was claimed, for example, that Britain could, in pursuing her own national road, take a direct cue from this paradigm whilst enlisting its particular

agents of foreign intelligence – into hundreds and hundreds of key positions in the Communist Party and in the machinery of State... once again their efforts to turn history backwards will only allow it to move forwards with even greater speed.", quoted in Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, 94

³⁴ It would undergo a number of revisions until its final replacement in November 1989 as the CPGB's statement of policy by the *Manifesto for New Times*.

³⁵ CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism*, [London, CPGB, 1951], n/p

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/brs/1951/51.htm>

³⁶ CPGB, *ibid.* n/p

constitutional arrangement in the service of social transformation.³⁷ Thus, in spite of the paradox represented by Yugoslavia (where a truly “national road” to Socialism had been established beyond the tutelage of Moscow), the Soviet leadership seemed ready, by 1951, to promote this notion of “differing” modulations of the Communist experience.

In the terse ideological climate of the Cold War, the possibilities opened up by a British national road included a central challenge to the growing influence of the USA and its alleged project of cultural “colonisation”. Much effort was devoted in Communist circles to analysing the extent of this threat and the radical potentialities inscribed in “national culture”. In summarising British achievements in this broad area, Communists could safely claim (without fear of courting an intrinsically reactionary chauvinism) that “our true heritage is the enemy of the anti-human outlook of Anglo-American big business, and the dying culture they seek to foster.”³⁸ By re-drawing the boundaries of Socialist criteria of acceptability, that is, by re-tuning progressive sensibilities to particular national heritages, the “democratic anti-imperialist” camp could conceivably secure for itself a potential grip on otherwise irreducibly alien political settings.

The Cominform doctrine of the two camps was organically linked from the outset to a strict cultural policy associated with the name of the Soviet Central Committee’s General Secretary, Andrei Zhdanov. “Zhdanovism” reconfigured the ideological universe of Stalinism as actively antagonistic – that is, in constant and overt

³⁷ “The enemies of Communism accuse the Communist Party of aiming to introduce Soviet Power in Britain and abolish Parliament. This is a slanderous misrepresentation of our policy. Experience has shown that in present conditions the advance to Socialism can be made just as well by a different road. For example, through People’s Democracy, without establishing Soviet Power, as in the People’s Democracies of Eastern Europe.”, CPGB, *ibid.*, n/p

³⁸ Sam Aaronovitch, “The American Threat to British Culture in Jack Lindsay (ed.) *Arena: The U.S.A. Threat to British Culture*, (June/July 1951), 16. Aaronovitch’s catalogue of the said “heritage” is rather inclusive, considering the avowedly “bourgeois” nature of many of the names listed (Darwin, T.H. Huxley, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, etc.). Moreover, his judgement is uncompromising: “[j]ust the bare roll call is enough to rouse one’s pride”.

opposition – to the capitalist world, whilst undercutting the class adversarial content suggested by an earlier Leninist notion of world revolution. Zhdanovism came to represent the Soviet bloc’s articulation of the Cold War impasse, combining high-pitched ideological agonistics with a real – if tense – pattern of political coexistence. Culture and the arts became a privileged domain of strategic intervention, raising the standards of orthodoxy – as conceived of by late Stalinism – to a new confrontational level which would certify the solidity, resilience and, most importantly in these times of potential defection from both camps, homogeneity of the Socialist way.³⁹

As Antoine Baudin has pointed out, “Zhdanovism represented the realization of total artistic organization.”⁴⁰ Aesthetically, it constituted a violent redeployment of the central tenets of Socialist realism as defined in the 1930s.⁴¹ The operative principles of this paradigm relied on the dynamic articulation of three concepts: “ideological commitment”, “party-mindedness” and “national-popular spirit”.⁴² The first of these categories emphasised the structurally central position occupied by the “idea” or political motivation which the artwork enveloped. “Party-mindedness” alluded to the explicitly militant outlook of the work, understood as a genuine contribution to the “construction of Communism”, while the “national-popular spirit” that the artwork must embody was defined against the bourgeois temptations of “nationalism” on the one hand, and “cosmopolitanism” on the other.

³⁹ The first symptoms of this late Stalinist recrudescence of orthodoxy in the arts erupted in 1946, with the controversy created around the writings of satirist Mikhail Zoshenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova – as well as the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* in which their work had been published.

⁴⁰ Antoine Baudin, “‘Why is Soviet Painting Hidden from Us?’ Zhdanov Art and Its International Relations and Fallout, 1947-1953”, in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds.) *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 228

⁴¹ Most notably, at the Moscow Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, which established that socialist realism “is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism”, Angela Kimyongür, *Socialist Realism in Louis Aragon’s Le Monde Réel* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1995), 15-16

⁴² Leonid Heller, “A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories”, in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (ed.), *ibid.*, 51

The renovated virulence accorded to these principles derived from a strategic repositioning of Marxism-Leninism during a famous philosophical debate conducted by Zhdanov in 1947. The latter's central claim (in a move which would constitute the theoretical horizon of the period) was that philosophy as such was a bourgeois category and therefore purely illusory, and that the true history of ideas was confined to the ongoing struggle between materialism and idealism: "[c]orrespondingly, Marxist-Leninist aesthetics no longer meant the study of various aesthetic views and concepts, but rather the history of "struggle for a materialist aesthetics against idealist directions and theories"".⁴³ According to this view, the radical disparity and opposition between the bourgeois and socialist worldviews – which the unfolding international situation made manifest – presented socialists with the challenge and responsibility to assert and enact a sense of moral superiority in every sphere of engagement. Zhdanovism proposed a broad "battle of ideas", through which the theoretical and indeed moral ascendancy of the Marxist-Leninist camp would be universally asserted. It was the duty of Communists to engage in that battle and to continue to expose the "decadence of capitalist ideas", tearing through the manifold cloaks which reaction may strategically choose to don.⁴⁴ Thus, for example, the programmatic injunction that writers should act

⁴³ Leonid Heller, *ibid.*, 52

⁴⁴ See, for example, James Gardner, "The Battle of Ideas and the Importance of Theory" in *Communist Policy to Meet the Crisis: Report of the 21st National Congress of the Communist Party* (London: CPGB, 1949). As already noted apropos of the Yugoslav crisis and the witchhunt for Titoists which ensued, different brands of social democratic leftism were subsumed within a sweeping denunciation aimed at the strengthening of orthodoxy within the movement. Thus, according to Gardner: "[t]he more the class struggle develops and the more the workers begin to see through the Right-Wing reformist leaders, the more capitalism will throw out various breeds of leftists, mouthing revolutionary phrases to capture the workers and keep them in the capitalist net. It is not by chance that we see the "rising star" of Aneurin Bevan. It is not an accident that Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole, old reserves of capitalism, are being thrown into the limelight. It is not by accident that tons of Tito-Trotskyist tracts are churned out by the Yugoslav Embassy and given wide prominence in the capitalist Press. Police spies and intelligence agents were once "educated" on Trotskyist literature—now "Titoism" plays that role. We must increase our vigilance against leftist demagogy, leftist efforts to catch the left-moving Labour workers, and various attempts of Titoists, Trotskyists and others of that ilk to penetrate our own ranks with ultra-revolutionary cloaks. For whatever deceptive phraseology they use, they only serve the interests of capitalism and not of the working class. This is the real meaning of the situation in Yugoslavia and of the Rajk Trial in Budapest." Gardner, *ibid.*, 49

as “engineers of the soul”, in charge of “the scientific care of reality” – in the words of Louis Aragon – rested on a characteristically “late Stalinist” or “Zhdanovite” conception of Marxism as an intellectual arsenal with a precise offensive function in the context of the Cold War.⁴⁵

The XXth National Congress of the CPGB (held in February 1948) was particularly sensitive to the new strategy and therefore insistent on the intellectual tasks which lay ahead. The promotion and “full mastery” of Marxist theory was accorded pride of place in this struggle to gain the intellectual and consequently political upper hand. As George Thomson noted in a speech on the Centenary of the *Communist Manifesto* (during the aforementioned congress):

To explain Marxism is to develop it. As professional workers, we must learn to apply Marxism in our special field... We must work in our branches as specialists – as teachers, doctors, journalists, writers, musicians, painters, poets. Only then shall we be making the distinctive contribution that we have to make, and by making it we shall enrich the life of the branch and of the whole Party.⁴⁶

The scientific interpretation of Marxism, which, as we have seen, reverberated in the socialist-realist prescription, generally offered a privileged theoretical standpoint from which to launch the campaigns and “battles” of the late Stalinist period. In Britain, “scientism” had been accepted as the Marxist orthodoxy of the 1930s, opposing its stringent epistemology to the relatively porous libertarian tradition of the Plebs League (which, according to Raphael Samuel, “combined a revolutionary outlook with a

⁴⁵ Kimyongür, *ibid.*, 20. As we shall see, the emphasis on “science” is particularly characteristic of this period.

⁴⁶ George Thomson, *The Battle of Ideas* (London: CPGB, 1948), 5

speculative spirit of philosophical inquiry”).⁴⁷ As Gerard McCann has noted, both formative Marxist lineages were active in the creation of the British Party in 1920, yet only the rational-scientific outlook/strain would survive into the critical 1930s and constitute itself as a theoretical orthodoxy.⁴⁸

The year 1931 has been seen as a fundamental watershed in the history of British Marxism, as it inaugurates a fruitful period of interaction between dialectical materialism (in its more Soviet-influenced incarnation) and the proper epistemology of the natural sciences. An international Congress on the History of Science and Technology was held in London in the month of July, marking a new departure for the British scientific community with the unexpected arrival of a large delegation from the USSR.⁴⁹ The papers read by the Soviet representatives opened up new avenues of interpretation and reconceptualisation of the specific social function accorded to science under different socio-economic formations. As the delegation’s chairman, Nikolai Bukharin, argued in his programmatic statement, “Theory and Practice from the standpoint of Dialectical Materialism”, capitalism was – because unaided by the totalising framework of dialectical materialism – wedded to the “division between the pure and the practical, that is, between theory and practice” and consequently inimical to the advance of science and technology and to the general expansion of knowledge.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Raphael Samuel, “British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One”, *New Left Review* vol. 1, no. 120 (March-April 1980), 24

⁴⁸ Gerard McCann, *Theory and History: Political Thought of E.P. Thompson* (London: Ashgate, 1997), 12

⁴⁹ Edwin A. Roberts, *The Anglo-Marxists: A Study in Ideology and Culture* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 150

⁵⁰ Roberts, *ibid.*, 151

The emancipatory potential of scientific inquiry could only be secured through the resolution and surpassing of bourgeois contradictions and dead-ends.⁵¹

The shift of perspective which this encounter with Soviet science brought about was consecrated by the Social Relations in Science (SRS) movement, which established an enduring link between the traditional concerns of Cambridge “High Science” and a social sensibility grounded in the cultural forms and strategies of the Popular Front. For indeed, as Edwin Roberts has pointed out, the SRS was not an “exclusively Marxist” undertaking, but rather “a common cause of progressive forces” benefiting from the peculiar admixture of ideological influences which underpinned the new policy of left alliances in the mid to late 1930s.⁵² Typically associated with the names of J.B.S. Haldane, Lancelot Hogben, Joseph Needham and Hyman Levy, the SRS movement found its greatest theoretician and proponent in the figure of J.D. Bernal, and its most elaborate theoretical statement in his 1939 magnum opus, *The Social Function of Science*, which came to be regarded as the theoretical culmination of 1930s British Marxism.

Bernal examines the relative position accorded to scientific inquiry under Capitalism, Fascism and Soviet Socialism, assessing the structural and ideological limitations and possibilities contained within each. In his evaluation of the first, Bernal concludes that the productive rhythms of capital are often detrimental to the consistent and homogeneous succession of practical discoveries and consequently, to the overall advancement of scientific knowledge. In a market economy, profitability is the exclusive criterion of validation for scientific development, relegating all non-

⁵¹ Thus, for example, the debate in evolutionary theory between vitalists and mechanists or idealists and materialists had been transcended by Soviet science, as B.M. Zavadovsky suggested in his paper on the “Interrelationships of the Physical and Biological Sciences”, Roberts, *ibid.*, 150

⁵² Roberts, *ibid.*, 153

commercial uses of technology to a secondary plane. Historic Fascism, for its part (Bernal focuses on the case of Nazi Germany), rehearses a virulent version of monopolistic Capitalism combined with “economic nationalism”, resulting in a particularly noxious subjection of science to the specific ideological ends of the regime. By contrast (and here, the limited vision of Anglo-Marxism in its High Stalinist incarnation becomes evident), the Soviet system was characterised as offering a leading model of “integrationism”, that is, a harmonious articulation of “research, experiments, application, and work all made into equal virtues with the separation of hand and brain being overcome.”⁵³

The attraction exerted by Soviet science during the 1930s and its consecration in a recognisably British embodiment of Marxist theoretical practice was to suffer dramatically from the disreputable phenomenon of Lysenkoism. Trofim Lysenko’s unorthodox ideas in the fields of biology and agronomy had promised to resolve the more pressing economic problems faced by the Soviet regime in the 1930s whilst concocting an appropriately Marxist rhetoric to suit his definitive “proletarian science”. Offering makeshift (and as it would turn out, radically unscientific) solutions to the growing difficulties by which Soviet agriculture was beset in the wake of the collectivisations, his practice of “vernalisation” – a fuzzy term covering a variety of *ad hoc* treatments which he applied to seeds – was elevated to the status of a paradigm shift with the personal sanction of Stalin himself. Lysenko’s “revolutionary” method was enshrined by Communist authorities as the ultimate expression of a genuinely Socialist solution to agriculture, and a definitive blow to the “old, metaphysical” biology which kept thriving in the West.⁵⁴ The continuing official endorsement of Lysenkoism until

⁵³ J.D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967 [1939]), 224

⁵⁴ Official canonisation finally arrived in August 1948 with the formal banning of standard genetics in the Soviet Union. See Nikolai Krementsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1997)

the 1960s was to have disastrous consequences for Soviet science as a whole, and not least, following the strict endorsement of this new “proletarian” orthodoxy by foreign Parties such as the CPGB, for the general understanding of Soviet-sanctioned “scientific Socialism”.⁵⁵ This decline was nevertheless gradual, and the strong associations attached to the scientific outlook could be sensed in British Communist circles throughout the post-war years.

The specific intellectual ferment upon which the British Communist Party Historians’ Group fed at the time of its formation in the 1940s was thoroughly informed by this scientific rationalist mindset, according to which historical progress was underwritten by a naturalist teleology modelled on technological development. For the Marxist historians working under the institutional aegis of the CPGB: “[t]he science of history was pivoted on laws of development: humanity moved forward in a progression from point to point until, with the achievement of socialism, pre-history ended and real history began.”⁵⁶ Marxist historiography in the 1930s and 40s tended to concentrate on the social and political transformations of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, with a specific focus on the English Revolution and its premature rehearsal of democratic ideas. This was reflected, as Raphael Samuel has noted, in the abundant scholarship produced by the Party Group in those years, as well as in the “gravitational

⁵⁵ The official adoption of the pro-Lysenko stance by the CPGB caused the alienation of hitherto staunch scientific supporters, such as – and perhaps most notably – J.B.S. Haldane, himself a pioneering geneticist who had borne the brunt of the controversy. See Roberts, *ibid.*, 181ff.

⁵⁶ Raphael Samuel, *ibid.*, 95 The professional journal to which the Group’s activities gave rise in 1952, *Past and Present*, was initially subtitled, in a symptomatic gesture, “A Journal of Scientific History”. See Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 20-23

pull it exercised on Marxist scholars working in others fields” (including creative writers of a progressive inclination).⁵⁷

The Communist Party Historians’ Group was launched in 1946, following discussions about a revised edition of A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England*. Morton’s work, originally published in 1938, was genealogically connected to “a more broadly based, if theoretically less demanding” tradition of People’s History, whose intellectual roots lay in radical-liberal, rather than openly Socialist, ground. Thus, Morton credited J.R. Green’s *Short History of the English People* (1877) as having provided, not only a source of inspiration for his own title, but more generally, a solid interpretative model and epistemological framework. Other notable instances of this 19th and early 20th century democratic historical lineage included Thorold Rogers’ *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (1884) and John and Barbara Hammond’s *The Village Labourer* (1911) – the latter of which would greatly influence Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* and Hobsbawm and Rudé in *Captain Swing*.⁵⁸

The Marxist historical tradition which crystallised around the Party Group was by no means restricted in its scope or homogeneous in its composition.⁵⁹ Thus, in addition to the initial impulse lent by historians Hill, Hilton, Hobsbawm, Saville and Max Morris, the Group managed to attract the enthusiastic support of older scholars such as Dona Torr and Maurice Dobb. Torr’s influence upon British Marxist historiography in this context has been acknowledged as paramount. Born in 1883, she

⁵⁷ Interest in the English Civil War gave rise to a number of works, scholarly and fictional, by Iris Morley, Montague Slater (*Englishmen with Swords*) and Jack Lindsay (*John Bunyan and 1649 – Novel of a Year*). See Samuel, *ibid.*, 27

⁵⁸ A fuller allusion to radical historiography in this period would necessarily refer to Henry Hyndman’s *Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (1883), James Connolly’s *Labour in Irish History* (1907) and Tom Johnston’s *History of the Scottish Working Classes* (1920). See Samuel, *ibid.*, 39

⁵⁹ See Harvey J. Kaye, “E.P. Thompson, the British Marxist Historical Tradition and the Contemporary Crisis”, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 253

was a founding member of the CPGB in 1920 and a leading Marxist scholar throughout her life, and her magnum opus, *Tom Mann and His Times*, was consistently hailed as a monument of precisely the brand of People's History from which the Group's activities derived.⁶⁰ Torr was responsible for the general editorship of the series "History in the Making" – a co-ordinated display of the Group's pioneering scholarship which included four monographs covering a wide chronological range, from the Civil War to the early years of the Labour Party.⁶¹

The year of the formation of the Party Group, 1946, also saw the publication of a work which would exert a lasting influence on these historians: Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*.⁶² Dobb was, with Torr, the other luminary of an earlier generation towards whom the younger Party historians looked for intellectual and political inspiration. His approach to Marxist theory, in works such as *On Marxism Today* (1931) would to some extent pre-figure themes and concerns of the early New Left. Thus, for example, Dobb's dynamic conception of History implied a rejection of deterministic models and a valorisation of concepts such as "agency" and "experience" – indeed concepts whose relevance to Thompson's historical epistemology is, as we will see, crucial.⁶³

In Dobb's words, "[h]istorical experience is a moving process in which man himself is an active agent. The "reality" of history, if it has a meaning, can only mean the totality of history itself: and precisely in activity – in making history – does man establish his relation to the objective world and learn what history is."⁶⁴ Historical

⁶⁰ See Dona Torr, *Tom Mann and His Times* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956)

⁶¹ Max Morris, *From Cobbett to the Chartists* (1948); J.B. Jefferys, *Labour's Formative Years* (1948); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point* (1948) and C. Hill and E. Dell, *The Good Old Cause* (1949).

⁶² Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1946)

⁶³ This shift away from Stalinist orthodoxy would earn Dobb the rebuke of the *Daily Worker*. See Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 28

⁶⁴ Quoted in Kaye, *ibid.*, 28

understanding, then, can only be gained from the analysis of History's total relations: interaction, movement and conflict provide safer routes of access to this specific meaning than the generation and application of isolated and static categories. This dynamic conception of History (and in particular, of capitalism qua historical phenomenon) forms the theoretical core of his *Studies*. In this ground-breaking work, Dobb emphasises the developmental aspects of the capitalist mode of production, proposing an integrated view of its historical specificity. His analysis moves beyond the narrowly economistic perspective, focusing instead on the multi-modality which characterises each historical epoch. If the capitalist mode of production, argues Dobb, cannot be reduced to a narrowly mechanistic arrangement or set of determinations, the concept of class cannot in turn be produced as a static, purely economic category, and must be accounted for as a complex historical phenomenon.⁶⁵

In his studies on medieval society, Rodney Hilton expressed a similar concern for the dynamic aspects of History and, in particular, for those which thematised "the potentialities for resistance to exploitation of the subordinated classes."⁶⁶ Hilton posited conflict as the defining relationship between peasants and lords and as the "prime mover" of medieval society. This perspective problematised the static conception inherited from traditional historical accounts of the Middle Ages and resisted, in turn,

⁶⁵ See Maurice Dobb, *ibid.* and Kaye, *ibid.*, 68. In a sense, Dobb surpasses or transcends the theoretical antinomies of the base/superstructure model, as entertained by orthodox Marxists of the period. His attentiveness to the complex overture of historical process makes him a fundamental precedent for the epistemological recasting of later historians like Thompson. In effect, these words about the latter by Ellen Meiksins Wood could easily apply to Dobb: "a profound sense of *process*, expressed in an unequalled capacity for tracing the intricate interplay between continuity and change; and an ability to reveal the logic of production relations not as an abstraction but as an operative historical principle visible in the daily transactions of social life, in concrete institutions and practices outside the sphere of production itself.", E.M. Wood, "Falling Through the Cracks: E.P. Thompson and the Debate on Base and Superstructure", in Kaye and McClelland (eds.), *ibid.*, 142

⁶⁶ Quoted in Kaye, *ibid.*, 71

the economic determinism associated with a certain brand of Marxism in terms which expanded and applied Dobb's understanding of historical agency.⁶⁷

Coupled with this determination in the work of the Marxist historians to present the subaltern of History as effectual agents and makers of their own destiny, was the didactic aspiration to articulate a genealogy of popular resistance in which present-day Communists and radicals may distinguish the seeds and sources of their own struggle.⁶⁸ Thus, Hilton and Fagan, in a book on the English Rising of 1381, stated that it was their aim to "present to the British people one part of their own tradition of struggle for popular liberties."⁶⁹ By reconstructing the "experience" of silenced historical subjects, that is, by drawing an analytical trajectory "from the bottom up", the entrenched imbalances of traditional historiography would be overcome and a radical shift in the conventional geometry of empowerment, attained. Enduring notions of social harmony would thereby be questioned and a *space of possibility and radical change*, opened up within the studied conjunctures. In charting the dynamics of medieval rebellion, Hilton observed, for example, that:

The lords and the peasant communities could not, in the nature of things co-exist in a state of natural harmony. The lord's ownership of his soil and its villein occupants was firmly established in law too recently to be accepted without question. The aristocratic structure of society, the institution of lordship, and the ownership of great estates were of course accepted as if they had existed since the beginning of time. But within this aristocratic

⁶⁷ As Hilton acknowledged, this dynamic understanding of social relations in the period was greatly indebted to the French historian Marc Bloch. Bloch had written: "[t]o the historian, whose task is merely to observe and explain the connections between phenomena, agrarian revolt is as natural to the seigneurial regime as strikes, let us say, are to large-scale capitalism." Quoted in Kaye, *ibid.*, 76

⁶⁸ As it was claimed in the preface to a collection of essays in honour of Dona Torr, "history is present as well as past politics". John Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954), 9

⁶⁹ Quoted in Kaye, *ibid.*, 85

framework, ancient peasant communities still doubted the legality of the absolute disposal by the lord of the commons, still doubted whether any men except slaves could be treated as unfree, still doubted whether lords had the right to increase or change rents and customary services.⁷⁰

In this attempt to press past conjunctures for a new realm of emancipatory potential with practical relevancy to contemporary challenges, the English Civil War presented a privileged scenario pregnant with characteristic lineages of radicalism. In the days of the Popular Front, this area of inquiry had been engaged by numerous historians on the left, including E. Meyer, D.M. Wolfe, J. Lindsay and Montague Slater, while the publication of volumes such as A.S.P. Woodhouse's *Puritanism and Liberty* (1938), which reproduced verbatim the Putney Debates of 1647, made the political and ideological context of the Revolutionary period widely available and immediately relevant to the socio-political situation of pre-war and wartime Britain.⁷¹

The ideological context in which many of these debates took place, namely the Communist or Communist-influenced intellectual circles of the Popular Front days, was in turn genealogically involved with or affected by a tradition of Nonconformity which found in the Civil War its primal scene and discursive matrix.⁷² As Raphael Samuel has

⁷⁰ Rodney H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1983 [1966]), 154

⁷¹ As Samuel has observed, the Putney Debates "were widely diffused in Forces Education during the war, through the Army Bureau For Current Affairs, and they also served as a natural reference point on the Home Front when the issues of post-war reconstruction were discussed.", *ibid.*, 27. It is notable that one of the prominent polemical tracts released on the left of the Labour Movement during this period, Aneurin Bevan's *Why Not Trust the Tories* (1944) chose to conclude with a reflection on these 17th century debates and their relevance to the unfolding struggle for democracy. As Bevan put it: "[i]t has taken almost three centuries for the situation feared by Oliver Cromwell to unfold itself fully upon the British political stage", Aneurin Bevan ("Celticus"), *Why Not Trust the Tories?* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1944), 88

⁷² The great Marxist historian of the English Revolution is, of course, Christopher Hill. Even if his intellectual engagement begins (in 1940) with a conventionally Marxian (although disputed at the time from the ranks of orthodoxy, see Dworkin, *ibid.*, 34-37) analysis, his later works have paid greater attention to the "ideological" or "superstructural" conjunctures of the period, with a special emphasis on the radical aspects of Puritan creeds and sects. His early views can be found in Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979 [1940])

noted, “[t]he vanguard Party envisaged by the Comintern failed to materialise: what remained instead was a rather Calvinist notion of the elect, and it is perhaps indicative of this tendency that the Party leadership, then as at all times, contained a quite disproportionate number of Scots.”⁷³ Moreover, “[t]he historians recruited to the Party in the period of the Popular Front seem to have come, quite largely, from a background of ‘liberal dissent’”.⁷⁴ It was the moral stock of radical Protestantism, whose roots could be traced to the climacteric of the 17th century, which animated in several ways the drive and commitment of many of these Party activists. As Thompson would tellingly claim after his break with the Party in 1956: “[w]e are a protestant people, distrustful of system-building: we have not suffered under an ideological *orthodoxy*, backed by the power of the state, for several hundred years.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Samuel, *ibid.*, 50

⁷⁴ Samuel, *ibid.*, 52

⁷⁵ E.P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”, *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 140

2. The Making of English Socialist Humanism

The work carried out by the British Marxist Historians during the period of activity of the Party Group and after, has been hailed as a distinguished and peculiar contribution, not only to the particular areas of engagement in which these authors excelled, but also to the broader field of Marxist theory itself. Their characteristic endorsement of an epistemology from “the bottom up” reinforced a particular understanding of “class” and “class struggle” as determinate yet dynamic interpretative horizons for historical inquiry.

The influence of the French “history of mentalities” as practised, for example, by the *Annales* School, and of the work of scholars of the French Revolution such as Georges Lefebvre (who popularised the notion of “history from below”) and Albert Soboul, was paramount.¹ These historians’ collective contribution towards a dynamic conception of class was perhaps taken to its most developed expression in the work of E.P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class* constitutes a paradigmatic elaboration upon the formative specificities of the working class in the period between 1790 and 1832. In this rendition, class does not emanate from a purely structural determination, but is played out in a series of contingent elements which can be identified as part of a historical process.² In the preface to the book, Thompson defined class as a “historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly

¹ Kaye, “E.P. Thompson, the British Marxist Historical Tradition and the Contemporary Crisis”, 222-227
Lefebvre was also a great influence on George Rudé’s studies on the “revolutionary crowd”, see below.

² See William H. Sewell Jr., “How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-class Formation”, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *ibid.*

unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.”³ It is through the concrete, immanent articulation of a relationship (a community of interest leading to a community of experience) which crystallises in consciousness that class effectively “happens”. Class is thus not a pre-given category to be apprehended before or outside real eventuation: “[l]ike any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure.”⁴

This dynamic articulation of historical concepts essentially repudiated the high theoretical gesture implied by Marxists of continental provenance or influence (notably, at the time of publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*, Anderson and Nairn)⁵ and the fundamental disregard this entailed for a genuinely emancipatory and anti-authoritarian recuperation of past conjunctures. Thus, for example, the abstraction of a totalising “mode of production” from the immanent complexity and “fluency” of historical phenomena represents, for Thompson, an unjustified and noxious tampering with the radical productivity inscribed in the actual historical process. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has pointed out, the concept of “mode of production” as rehearsed by Marxist theorists in the structuralist tradition, does not seek to account for or empirically explicate any real “formation” in society:

It is as if “real, concrete” historical social formations are composed of elements whose inner structural logic is theoretically determined, while

³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1963]), 8

⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 8. A developed and much-quoted formulation of this definition was provided in his 1965 article “The Peculiarities of the English” – which is discussed below –: “[c]lass is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes: and, ultimately, the definition can be made in the medium of *time* – that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interest, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.” E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English”, *Socialist Register* no. 2 (1965), 357

⁵ See below.

historical processes simply break up and recombine these elements in various (arbitrary and contingent?) ways. Historical analysis can then do little more than describe and classify the combinations of modes of production and fragments of modes of production that constitute any given social formation.⁶

Through this analytical prism, the tangible matter of History is rendered irrelevant by virtue of a focal shift towards a superior and theoretically “purer” concern with structure. As Wood goes on to observe: “[t]here is in these theoretical principles both too much rigid determinism and too much arbitrariness and contingency – that is, too much abstract, almost idealist, theoretical determination and not enough historical causality.”⁷ As Gerard McCann has noted:

The method which [Thompson] employed [in *The Making of the English Working Class*] to chart the development of the working class was intended to be a deliberate denial of the methodological rules and laws of social historians, historical sociologists and conservative historians, who had persistently created “stratification systems” to convey what they interpreted to be the structure of a class. Against this, Thompson attributed the historical to the *human*. Class became a historical phenomenon and no longer the rigid, objective category of “the sociologist”.⁸

In this bold intervention, Thompson thrust his analytical weight and political pathos against the ritual dominance of a number of “prevailing orthodoxies”. Notably, the epistemological orientation of the book and its central emphasis on process and experience *from below* sought to counter the various distortions propagated by Fabian

⁶ Wood, *ibid.*, 131

⁷ Wood, *ibid.*, 132

⁸ McCann, *ibid.*, 73

historiography, a certain brand of empirical economic history and finally, a retrospective adherence (“the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ orthodoxy”) to figures and moments of the past in an attempt to identify “forerunners” and “pioneers” of contemporary institutions.⁹

While this latter orthodoxy chose to ignore the particular historical substance of the studied moments and protagonists, the first two were specifically faulted for their recognisable disparagement of a very real human “agency” (of labouring, suffering and desiring men and women) which the passive image of victimhood or, alternatively, pure statistical objectivity projected by these schools, could hardly accommodate. In contrast, Thompson’s approach sought – in some of his most famous words – “to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”¹⁰ This opposition to the smug arrogance of latter-day analytics is perhaps the main driving force behind Thompson’s anti-theoretical agenda (which we shall discuss at greater length in the next section) and original understanding of historical materialism. His definition of class emanates from a detailed engagement with the observable subjects of History rather than from a pre-conceived or axiomatic set of premises. This basic reformulation – or qualification, rather – of Marxist historical method was to accompany Thompson as a central insight towering over the empirical wealth of *The Making of the English Working Class* and subsequent works and providing an unending source of controversy with fellow socialists.

⁹ Writing in the early 1960s, Thompson is thinking of the social democratic “consensus” and its most representative institutions, such as the Welfare State.

¹⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 12 For the revolutionary impact Thompson’s book had on fellow historians, see Dworkin, *ibid.*, 182-185

Fifteen years after the momentous publication of the book, Thompson revisited some of his ongoing emphases with fresh theoretical self-reflexivity.¹¹ The notion of class which transpired from his archaeology of the English formative moment of 1790-1832 (and which the preface made explicit, as we have noted) was again redeployed as part of a consequential engagement with Marxist conceptuality. The utilisation of the concept of “class” as an organising category, as a heuristic means of organising historical data cannot be viewed independently of the general notion, in historical materialist epistemology, of “class struggle”. It is not that the latter expresses, with the utmost empirical accuracy the specific dynamics of *all* historical processes, but that no alternative mode of heuristic description is available. Thus, “class struggle” is a means of identifying general dispositions of forces which actually precede the particular formation of empirical agents. The theoretical consequence of this assumption, for Thompson, is that, however objectively determined, the *moment* of “class” is always consequent upon – and not anterior to – that of “class struggle”. In other words, antagonisms can be defined structurally as part of heuristic descriptions (even if the particular, empirical details of the descriptions vary), but classes cannot. Classes are not to be interpreted as static givens or projections of an immobile conception of the mode of production. Rather, they constitute the derivative moment and end-product of particular antagonisms (while “class consciousness” alludes to the predicative knowledge of that constitution).¹²

¹¹ E.P. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?”, *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1978)

¹² In a sympathetic assessment, Ellen Meiksins Wood has summarised Thompson’s argument thus: “[h]is historical project presupposes that relations of production distribute people into class situations, that these situations entail essential antagonisms and conflicts of interest, and that they therefore create conditions of struggle. Class *formations* and the discovery of class consciousness grow out of the process of struggle, as people ‘experience’ and ‘handle’ their class situations.” Ellen M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995), 80

The critical point in Thompson's position is that any notion of structure or determination, understood as "the setting of limits" (in a sense which brings him very close to the Williams of *Marxism and Literature*),¹³ is necessarily second to the rich reconstruction of the studied history, its idiosyncratic textures and peculiar hues.¹⁴ In other words, the principal task of a historical epistemology concerned with the democratic recuperation of silenced voices is, precisely, the reconstruction of experience. Hence, an appropriate characterisation of Thompson's approach is that which, surpassing the flawed label of "culturalism" (or even the sterner accusations of "voluntarism" and "subjectivism")¹⁵ emphasises this latter preoccupation in terms of a full-blown "experientialism".¹⁶

Thompson's mapping of the formative stages of the English working class brings this analytical commitment to experience and empirical detail to an engagement with the English equivalent of the *menu people* of the French Revolution and hence, to the particularities, triumphs and failures of an immature (but for that matter, fully active) set of proto-political agents.¹⁷ Thompson's bid is to recapture the internal rhythms of the multitude and thus to reconstruct its internal development and self-constitution into the industrial working-class of the nineteenth century. In this process, full account is taken of the assumptions and mentalities (however flawed or failed)

¹³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1977), 83-89. See below.

¹⁴ "Class eventuates as men and women *live* their productive relations, and as they *experience* their determinate situations, within 'the *ensemble* of the social relations', with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle these experiences in cultural ways", Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?", 150

¹⁵ Wood, *ibid.*, 81

¹⁶ Sewell, *ibid.*, 67-68. For the debate and controversy surrounding Thompson's alleged culturalism, see Stuart Hall, "In Defence of Theory", Richard Johnson, "Against Absolutism" and Thompson's rejoinder, "The Politics of Theory", all three published in the pages of *History Workshop Journal* and then collected in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 378-408. For the specific context, arguments and background to this debate, see the section "History, Utopia and the Limits of Theory" below.

¹⁷ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) is referenced as a central influence here. For a further paradigmatic example of "history from below" in this tradition, see George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981)

adopted in the course of this organic evolution. Thompson's starting point is thus not a structuralist definition of objective givens (the developmental stage of capitalism in the 1790s, for example), but "the tradition of Dissent, and its modification by the Methodist revival: the tradition made up of all those loose popular notions which combine in the idea of the Englishman's 'birthright'; and the ambiguous tradition of the eighteenth-century 'mob'".¹⁸

The revolutionary Protestantism concocted in the various of sects and doctrinal formulations of the 1640s and 50s reached the late 1700s radically modulated by the experience of political defeat and by the corresponding gentrification of a significant part of its epigones (as can be detected in the increasing respectability of eighteenth-century Quakerism, for example).¹⁹ A symptomatic disjunction occurs at the level of popular religion in this period, as the theologically advanced resultant of an earlier radicalism embraced by the masses came to be regarded as increasingly distanced or removed from the immediate social "experience" of the lower strata. Throughout the vicissitudes of the eighteenth century, the "Baptists, perhaps, showed the greatest consistency: and they remained most Calvinist in their theology and most plebeian in their following."²⁰ Bunyan is singled out as a connecting link between the revolutionary mood of the Civil War, the Jacobin moment of the 1790s and the nineteenth-century outbreaks ahead. In this light, *Pilgrim's Progress* can be read "with *Rights of Man*, [as] one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement." The "experience" it tells – crowned by the promise of "an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away" – combines "the other-worldly millennium of the Saints, who must 'patiently suffer from this world'" with "the lamentable cry... of

¹⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 27

¹⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 33

²⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 34

those who lost at Putney, and who had no share in the settlement of 1688.”²¹ In the popular reception of the book, Bunyan resumed and rehearsed for present generations of “Christ’s poor” the bitter yet hopeful realisations of a century of radical projections. It also reaffirmed a vision of the “reward” which had been reserved for the humble and of the revenge which the afterlife would mete out to their temporal oppressors in the form of eternal punishment.²²

The history of Dissent in the eighteenth-century is nevertheless – and this will be a crucial point in the development of Thompson’s argument regarding Methodist revivalism – fraught with the tensions of “opposing tendencies, both of which led away from any popular appeal: on the one hand, the tendency towards rational humanitarianism and fine preaching – too intellectual and genteel for the poor; on the other hand the rigid Elect... who stood apart from the ‘corrupt mass’ predestined to be damned.”²³ Against this backdrop of purity and disconnection from the social language of a disenfranchised people, John Wesley’s Methodist Church, with its emphasis on evangelism – the motto being “you have nothing to do but save souls” – was to lay the foundations of a highly paradoxical channel and milieu for the early formative impulses of the nascent working class. Its genealogical ties with the radical theology of the preceding century were at their most expressive in the emphasis placed on belonging amongst the lower social groups: “the poor man’s Dissent of Bunyan, of Dan Taylor, and – later – of the Primitive Methodists was a religion *of* the poor; orthodox Wesleyanism remained as it had commenced, a religion *for* the poor.”²⁴

²¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 34 For a more detailed analysis of Thompson’s engagement with the theological (and political) radicalism of seventeenth-century Puritanism, and especially with the utopian aspirations of antinomians and Diggers, see below.

²² For a searching study of Bunyan and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, see Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1988)

²³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 37

²⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 41

This direct bearing on the lived experience of the underdog contrasted – and here resides the shaping paradox of early Methodism – with the hierarchical organisational forms instituted by Wesley. Thus, at “one level the reactionary – indeed, odiously subservient – character of official Wesleyanism can be established without the least difficulty.”²⁵ Yet on a different level, Methodism led the way in the consolidation of “alien democratic tendencies within itself, while at the same time it was serving...as a model of other organizational forms.”²⁶ Thompson refers in this context to the Kilhamite schism of 1797, which represented, with the establishment of the Methodist New Connexion, a condensation of some of the more radical opinions within the movement.²⁷ Yet it is among the orthodox and reactionary ranks of the Wesleyan faction – especially during the great wave of anti-Jacobin agitation after 1795 – “that Methodism made the most headway amongst working people”.²⁸

Thompson reads the patterns of revivalism which punctuated the period of consolidation of the Methodist Church between 1790 and 1830 as a direct function and catalyst of popular sentiment in the face of broader political oscillations. Thus the characteristic emotionalism of Methodist and Baptist revivals, with their hysterical theatrics and “enthusiasm” (“swooning, groaning, crying out, weeping and falling into paroxysms”) signals a popular metabolisation of tangible defeat in a context of widespread reaction and counter-revolutionary war.²⁹ This political background contextualises the otherwise perceptive analyses of Weber and Tawney regarding the propinquity of the emergent capitalist ethos and the Puritan ethic.³⁰ In particular, the

²⁵Thompson, *ibid.*, 45

²⁶Thompson, *ibid.*, 47

²⁷Thompson, *ibid.*, 49 In this regard, Thompson notes that “in several places the link between the New Connexion and actual Jacobin organization is more than a matter of inference.”

²⁸Thompson, *ibid.*, 50

²⁹Thompson, *ibid.*, 418

³⁰Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976); R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (West Drayton, Middlesex: Penguin, 1948)

notorious cult of sublimation fostered by Methodism (“[i]t is difficult to conceive of a more essential disorganization of human life, a pollution of the sources of spontaneity bound to reflect itself in every aspect of personality”) must be countenanced in the light of a general condition of class-antagonism experienced in proto-political terms.³¹ Thus, observes Thompson, “the morbid deformities of ‘sublimation’ are the most common aberrations of the poor in periods of social reaction; while paranoiac fantasies belong more to periods when revolutionary enthusiasms are released.”³² It is in this precise sense that the rise of Methodism must be adjudged: “as a ‘reactive cultural pattern’” whose emphasis on chiliasm, rewards in the afterlife and mortification in the temporal, are inseparable from the social experience of hopelessness.³³

Compounded with this sublimatory tendency, the formative moment of the English working class is inextricable from a deeply ingrained assumption of liberty (which often takes the form of a foundational image in the notion of the “freeborn Englishman”), whose oscillating trajectory – between defeat and resurgence – provides a general background to the 1790-1832 period:

Liberty of conscience was the one great value which the common people had preserved from the Commonwealth. The countryside was ruled by the gentry, the towns by corrupt corporations, the nation by the corruptest corporation of all: but the chapel, the tavern and the home were their own. In the ‘unsteeped’ places of worship there was room for a free intellectual life and for democratic experiments with ‘members unlimited’.³⁴

³¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 409

³² Thompson, *ibid.*, 54

³³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 419, 433

³⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 56

This ideological breeding ground – preserved, as we have seen, in the conventicles of Dissent and in a coextensive popular culture – was finally let loose, in the early 1790s, by the example of the French Revolution. Yet the English agitation of these years, Thompson insists, cannot be seen as a mere transposition of French developments: “[i]t was an English agitation, of impressive dimensions, for an English democracy.”³⁵ The massive impact of Tom Paine and his *Rights of Man* is inseparable from this native ebullience of the popular classes resulting from a native development of Radicalism.³⁶ In that sense, Thompson argues, “[t]hese English Jacobins were more numerous, and more closely resembled the *menu people* who made the French Revolution, than has been recognized. Indeed, they resemble less the Jacobins than the *sans-culottes* of the Paris ‘sections’, whose zealous egalitarianism underpinned Robespierre’s revolutionary war dictatorship of 1793-4.”³⁷

The *experience* of popular Radicalism, adapted to the political climate and international circumstances of the 1790s, was therefore a thoroughly internal growth of the nascent working class rather than an external inheritance or imposition. This peculiar inflection and idiosyncratic development of English Jacobinism, Thompson emphasises, made it reach beyond the often timid pronouncements of radical figureheads such as Paine himself.³⁸ Thus the history of one the foremost Jacobin groups in England, the London Corresponding Society, provides telling instances of an

³⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 111

³⁶ “Here is something unusual – pitmen, keelmen, cloth-dressers, cutlers: not only the weavers and labourers of Wapping and Spitalfields, whose colourful and rowdy demonstrations had often come out in support of Wilkes, but working men in villages and towns over the whole country claiming *general* rights for themselves. It was this – and not the French Terror – which threw the propertied classes into panic”, Thompson, *ibid.*, 114

³⁷ Thompson references Albert Soboul’s classic, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l’an II* (Paris: Seuil, 1958). Daniel Guérin, *Bourgeois et bras nus, 1793-1795* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) is particularly close to Thompson’s libertarian emphasis.

³⁸ Whose effective political “programme” was never particularly radical by strictly French Revolutionary standards. Thus, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted: “[w]hen he came to France, he – like other English ‘Jacobins’ – joined the Gironde, and was a moderate even in that group.”, E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 2

evolution which cannot be attributed to superior example or to analogy with the French context. The Jacobinism of Thomas Spence, for example, or later, of his follower Thomas Evans, “took up Paine’s arguments against hereditary aristocracy and carried them to their conclusion”, a form of agrarian Socialism: ““we must destroy [writes Spence] not only personal and hereditary Lordship, but the cause of them all, which is Private Property in Land.”³⁹This radical and *internal* development within the experiential range of English popular Jacobinism (a development leading from Paine’s own “moderate” revolutionism⁴⁰ to an embryonic doctrine of agrarian Socialism) suggests an endogenous potential for self-fashioning which both paternalist and excessively objectivist interpretations tend to obfuscate.⁴¹

Thompson’s experientialism, which the historical narrative of *The Making* consistently belabours for over 900 pages, is given overt, and even programmatic, expression in passages such as the following:

The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force – the ‘industrial revolution’ – working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a ‘fresh race of beings’. The changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman – and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality

³⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 177

⁴⁰ Hobsbawm, *ibid.*, 1

⁴¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 230

before the law, of craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of political traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made.⁴²

In other words, the objective “determinism” which constitutes the target of Thompson’s polemic against, first, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, and later Althusser and his brand of structuralist Marxism, cannot be projected into a subject-less vacuum and thereby cleansed of its experiential marks. The structural developments of capitalism in this period are effective “determinants” in the sense that they establish real historical limits to the processing of subjective experience,⁴³ but on that account, they do not, of themselves, exhaust the formative range of the intervening agents. As a result, both the impositions and exertions of a rapidly changing system of production and the hopes and responses evinced by the workers generate a “structure of feeling”, in Williams’ formulation (as opposed to a deterministically conditioned “reflex”), of its own. In the devastation of the moral economy of domesticity and in the corresponding repositioning of the role of women, which Thompson analyses to great effect, a richly subjective world of working-class life insinuates itself beyond the raw facts of the technological revolution.⁴⁴ Consequently, “[t]he working-class community of the early nineteenth century was the product, neither of paternalism nor of Methodism, but in a high degree of conscious working-class endeavour. In Manchester or Newcastle the traditions of the

⁴² Thompson, *ibid.*, 213

⁴³ See Williams, *ibid.*, 128-135 and below.

⁴⁴ “Each stage in industrial differentiation and specialization struck also at the family economy, disturbing customary relations between man and wife, parents and children, and differentiating more sharply between ‘work’ and ‘life’.” Thompson, *ibid.*, 455. For a relevant (and more recent) discussion of this process of “differentiation”, see Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002) and Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

trade union and the friendly society, with their emphasis upon self-discipline and community purpose, reach far back into the eighteenth century.”⁴⁵

The shift from a prevalent mode of collective response to socio-economic transformations of an “objective” nature in the form of “mob” riots to a rather more sustained and structured series of “quasi-insurrectionary” expressions, suggests an internal evolution and conscious growth of this kind. Against the tide of anti-Jacobin reaction around the turn of the century (which culminated in the Combination Acts of 1799-1800),⁴⁶ the watershed marked by Luddism (1811-13) cannot be disengaged or isolated from a continuous tradition of resistance which builds on past experience whilst looking forward to future possibility. An evolutionary line which is not structurally dependent on economic change must be respected in this historical reconstruction: “Luddism must be seen as arising at the crisis-point in the abrogation of paternalist legislation, and in the imposition of the political economy of *laissez-faire* upon, and against the will and conscience of, the working people. It is the last chapter of a story which begins in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and whose greater part has been told in Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.”⁴⁷ The interpenetration of objective “determinants” and subjective conditions is most eloquent in the case of Luddism, which emerges “as a violent eruption of feeling against unrestrained industrial capitalism, harking back to an obsolescent paternalist code, and sanctioned by traditions of the working community.”⁴⁸

Thompson argues against the hasty understatement or systematic relegation, in standard historical analysis, of this movement to a pre-revolutionary position without

⁴⁵Thompson, *ibid.*, 457

⁴⁶ “[T]he Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 had forced the trade unions into an illegal world in which secrecy and hostility to the authorities were intrinsic to their very existence.” Thompson, *ibid.*, 550

⁴⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 594

⁴⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 601

major consequences or relevance to the mature development of the nineteenth-century Labour movement. On the contrary, he claims, the significance of Luddism must be recognised in the specific combination of backward- and forward-looking features, which made it “continually tremble on the edge of ulterior revolutionary objectives”. In that sense:

The Luddites were some of the last guildsmen, and at the same time some of the first to launch the agitations which lead on to the 10 Hour Movement. In both directions lay an alternative political economy and morality to that of *laissez faire*. During the critical decades of the Industrial Revolution, working people suffered total exposure to one of the most humanly degrading dogmas in history – that of irresponsible and unlicensed competition – and generations of outworkers died under this exposure. It was Marx who saw, in the passage of the 10 Hour Bill (1847), evidence that for “the first time... in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.”⁴⁹

The complexities of a lived mode of resistance, however assailed by contradictions and limitations of a historical-objective kind, thus supply the analytical key to a *whole way of struggle* from which the formal cast of class can then (and only then) be deduced.⁵⁰ A native language of independence and anti-authoritarianism grew along the tracks of an imposed situation or condition, thereby moulding it into a total *experience* of resistance informed by self-generated notions, hopes and frustrations.

Throughout *The Making of the English Working Class* (and particularly in the last chapter, significantly entitled “Class Consciousness”), Thompson emphasises the

⁴⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 603

⁵⁰ Thompson, as we will see, opposed this definition of a “whole way of struggle” to Williams’ allegedly neuter portrayal of culture as a “whole way of life”. See below.

traditions of autodidacticism which more often than not informed the immediate background and intellectual substance of working class notions. The libertarian corollary to the argument is inescapable. However complicit or coterminous with a received Radicalism of patrician provenance, the self-fashioned heritage of popular oppositionality incurred a radical anti-hierarchical tone:

The autodidact had often an uneven, laboured understanding, but it was his own. Since he had been forced to find his intellectual way, he took little on trust: his mind did not move within the established ruts of a formal education. Many of his ideas challenged authority, and authority had tried to suppress them. He was willing, therefore, to give a hearing to any new anti-authoritarian ideas.⁵¹

This certainly accounts for the fluidity – and indeed, instability – of the movement in its early formative stages, especially between 1825 and 1835, but it also grants a surer understanding of the possibilities generated within a culture whose worldview and ideology was not static but rather malleable, and coloured by its “indiscipline” and plurality of sources. Thus, for example, the paternalistic model of cooperation developed by Robert Owen – despite its own genealogical alienness to the working-class structure of feeling and intellectual sources –⁵² could easily find accommodation in a variegated tradition composed of fragments (“mob” action, sporadic insurrection, Jacobinism, proto-socialism) and yet totalised in a dynamic response to the changes brought about by industrial capitalism.

⁵¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 817

⁵² “For Owen indeed was not the first of the modern Socialist theorists... but one of the last of the eighteenth-century rationalists – he was Godwin, now setting out from New Lanark to claim the Chairmanship of the Board of Directors of the Industrial Revolution.” Thompson, *ibid.*, 863

The fact of a “collective self-consciousness” was the indisputable gain of a consolidating Industrial Revolution, but this acquisition cannot – once again – be written off as an external consequence of material processes beyond the range of lived experience. By way of summary, Thompson produces an evocative condensation of the meandering and extensive narrative (spanning some forty years of crucial transformations) which transacts, principally, as the sympathetic survey of a “heroic culture” drenched in the accents and vibrations of fully participating, *conscious* agents:

Enriched through the experiences of the seventeenth century, carrying through the eighteenth century the intellectual and libertarian traditions which we have described, forming their own traditions of mutuality in the friendly society and trades club, these men did not pass, in one generation, from the peasantry to the new industrial town. They suffered the experience of the Industrial Revolution as articulate, free-born Englishmen. Those who were sent to gaol might know the Bible better than those on the Bench, and those who were transported to Van Diemen’s Land might ask their relatives to send Cobbett’s *Register* after them.⁵³

In the subsequent debate between the first wave of the New Left and the group led by Perry Anderson (who would take over the editorship of the *New Left Review* in 1963), Thompson was taken to task for what these younger critics regarded as an excessively voluntaristic – and hence, insufficiently Marxist – interpretation, and consequently, for an overly sanguine portrayal of a working class which their historical analysis branded as essentially anomalous and inadequate. Lin Chun, in his history of

⁵³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 913-914

the New Left, has captured the substance of the charges levelled against the standard of labour history raised by *The Making of the English Working Class*: “Thompson ha[d] missed the fatal weaknesses, the defensive character, of the English working class which are of vital importance in understanding the problems of the contemporary labour movement... This is a major point on which the two New Left generations radically divided.”⁵⁴

The opening intervention in a debate which would transpire as the “first vigorous theoretical engagement by the British New Left” was Anderson’s “Origins of the Present Crisis” (followed by a number of developments of its central contentions by Tom Nairn and Anderson himself), an important dissection of the problems which in his opinion, and that prevalent amongst the second New Left, crippled the British historical and social debate.⁵⁵ Anderson began by pinpointing the “uniqueness” of the British situation in the fact that “*not one single structural study of our society*” was available, and further, that “no attempt has even been made at even the outline of a ‘totalizing’ history of modern British society.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 67. Subsequent criticism of Thompson’s “empiricist approach”, as Lin Chun observes, included searching feminist critiques of Thompson’s “essentialist and ‘universalised’ definition of class.” See, for example, Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Pantheon Books, 1983), which Chun regards “as an important supplement to *The Making of the English Working Class*”, *ibid.*, 100 n25. In this respect, see also Catherine Hall, “The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-class Culture in Nineteenth-century England”, in Kaye and McClelland (eds.), *ibid.*

⁵⁵ The main interventions in the famous debate between Thompson and Anderson/Nairn were, in order of publication: Perry Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, *New Left Review* 23 (January-February 1964); re-published in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn (eds.), *Towards Socialism* (London: NLR/Fontana, 1965), references are to this edition; Tom Nairn, “The British Political Elite”, *New Left Review* 23 (January-February 1964); Tom Nairn, “The English Working Class”, *New Left Review* 24 (March-April 1964); Tom Nairn, “The Anatomy of the Labour Party – 1”, *New Left Review* 27 (September-October 1964); Tom Nairn, “The Anatomy of the Labour Party – 2”, *New Left Review* 28 (November-December 1964); Tom Nairn, “Labour Imperialism”, *New Left Review* 32 (July-August 1965); Perry Anderson, “Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism”, *New Left Review* 35 (January-February 1966); Perry Anderson, “Components of the National Culture”, *New Left Review* 50 (July-August 1968). For Thompson’s 1965 riposte, “The Peculiarities of the English”, see below.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *ibid.*, 12

The bulk of Anderson's ensuing argument concentrated on the impossibility of constructing a genealogy of modern British history amenable or analogous to the paradigm offered by continental (especially French) models. The study of the English Revolution and of the subsequent development undergone in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular revealed the structural anomaly of a class – the bourgeoisie – which failed to attain a position of dominance according to the standard schema of capitalist evolution as encountered elsewhere. The dramatic consequences of this subordination could be felt, not only in the abnormal social pre-eminence retained by the aristocracy (which thereafter managed to impose its cultural and ideological outlook upon the rest of society as the *universal* class), but most symptomatically, in the dysfunctional development of a proletariat deprived of an ordinary transition to capitalist relations of production and hence subordinately entrenched in backward and piecemeal habits of opposition. Furthermore, the English proletariat was, in a very definite sense (just as the Revolution had been, in the 1640s), premature. Thus, “*England experienced the first industrial revolution, in a period of international counter-revolutionary war, producing the earliest proletariat when socialist theory was least formed and available*”.⁵⁷ And it was, paradoxically, in this early formative stage – covered by Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* – when the working class managed to evince its “maximum ardour and insurgency”.⁵⁸

Anderson's assessment of Britain's development since the Revolution modulated the historical appreciation of such notions as “agency” and “resistance” (so central, as we have seen, to Thompson's epistemology) in a sharply distinct direction. The end-balance of a historical survey of the (in Thompson's words) “sub-political” traditions of resistance which underpinned, in their multiple idioms and fragmentary

⁵⁷ Anderson, *ibid.*, 17

⁵⁸ Anderson, *ibid.*, 21

emphases, the oppositional subject and experience of insubordination – from Jacobinism, through Luddism to Chartism – was, according to Anderson, nil. The roots of this notorious insignificance can be traced directly to the Revolution itself which, on account of its very prematurity, its “primitive” and “pre-Enlightenment character”, proved incapable of generating a “universal tradition”. Consequently, the revolutionary exertions of 1640-1660 came to nothing and were rapidly dispelled in a settlement (that of 1688) whose prime beneficiary was not the bourgeoisie but the landed aristocracy: “Never was a major revolutionary ideology neutralized and absorbed so completely. Politically, Puritanism was a useless passion.”⁵⁹

Anderson and Nairn’s terms of analysis of this allegedly anomalous and paralytic situation were derived from the Gramscian stock. In “Origins of the Present Crisis”, Anderson analyses the relative position of the classes in terms of the notion of hegemony:

Hegemony was defined by Gramsci as the dominance of one social bloc over another, not simply by means of force or wealth, but by a social authority whose ultimate sanction and expression is a profoundly cultural supremacy... The hegemonic class is the primary determinant of consciousness, character and customs throughout the society. This tranquil and unchallenged sovereignty is a relatively rare historical phenomenon. In England, however, the unparalleled temporal continuity of the dominant class has produced a striking example of it.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Anderson, *ibid.*, 17

⁶⁰ Anderson, *ibid.*, 30. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985) was a late, “post-Marxist” declension – conjugated in the post-structuralist idiom of the Eighties – which steered the British reception of the theory of hegemony in new directions. For more on hegemony and the British reception of Gramsci, see the discussion of Williams below.

The hegemony wielded by the English dominant bloc is not the unified, and developed ideology of a “mature” bourgeoisie, but rather a slapdash mass of “commonplace prejudices and taboos.” The critical historical watershed remained that chronological abyss between the moment of the Commonwealth and that of French Jacobinism. Unlike in the evolution of 1789-95, English social structures were stabilised under the political weight of a recognisably feudal élite which subsequently managed to co-opt the bourgeoisie as an adjunct to its own interests and worldview.

“Traditionalism” and “empiricism” were, according to Anderson, the inevitable ideological by-products of this situation.⁶¹ And it was in the blinkered perspective of these traditions that the English proletariat (thereby bereft of solid rationalist constructions in the continental mould) was steeped for its own exertions. Utilitarianism in particular, was “transmitted” as ever so many “deadly germs... from which the Labour Party has so manifestly sickened in the twentieth century.”⁶² As a result, Fabianism – typically adorned with “[c]omplacent confusion of influence with power, bovine admiration for bureaucracy, ill-concealed contempt for equality, bottomless philistinism” –⁶³ represents the most advanced ideology of a native English tradition which, for the most part, remained immune to the enlightened complexities of Marxism.

Thompson’s riposte in “The Peculiarities of the English” confronted Anderson’s arguments with a wealth of historical detail, whilst re-inscribing the terms of debate within the ethical and political idiom of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Against Anderson’s theoretical compression of English capitalist development into a schematic model derived from the French experience, and in particular against the

⁶¹ Anderson, *ibid.*, 31

⁶² Anderson, *ibid.*, 36. See also Mark Wickham-Jones, “An exceptional comrade? The Nairn-Anderson interpretation”, in John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam (eds.), *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2003), 86-100

⁶³ Perry Anderson, *ibid.*, 37

problematical reluctance of both Nairn and Anderson to credit a predominantly agrarian class with the defining traits of a representative bourgeoisie, Thompson argued with characteristic panache and polemical vigour that:

It is a strain on one's semantic patience to imagine a class of *bourgeois* scattered across a countryside and dwelling on their estates, and it is easier to see in mercantile capital "the only truly bourgeois kernel of the revolution." But if we forget the associations with the French model which the term introduces, and think rather of the capitalist mode of production, then clearly we must follow Marx in seeing the landowners and farmers as a very powerful and authentic capitalist nexus.⁶⁴

The mechanistic conceptualisation of classes which suggests itself in Anderson's "Origins" appears to neglect the specific conditions under which English capitalism was adumbrated. Most crucially, argues Thompson, these authors' refusal to acknowledge a clear line of capitalist development in the English countryside during the early nineteenth century effectively overlooks a specifically English (or rather British, one should say) contribution which certainly reaches beyond the imputed obscurantism of native ideologies: *laissez faire*. In this regard, Thompson claims, it is important to remember that the productive conditions underpinning Adam Smith's doctrinal breakthrough were intimately connected with the requirements of an emergent agrarian capitalism: "we persistently forget that *laissez faire* emerged, not as the ideology of some manufacturing lobby, not as the intellectual yam turned out by the cotton mills, but in the great agricultural corn-belt."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English", *Socialist Register* 2 (1965), 315-316

⁶⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 318

The emergence of a coherent and unified capitalist ideology in *laissez faire* moreover represents the fundamental dismantling of the preceding “moral economy” of “provision”, in whose wake the formative expressions of working-class antagonism traced in *The Making* were concocted. The latter actively responded to “an anti-political economy whose harsh profit-and-loss purgatives voided the body politic of old notions of duty, mutuality, and paternal care” and which had little to do with the aristocratic *Weltanschauung* branded by Anderson as hegemonic in the English development.⁶⁶ By summarily reducing the position of the bourgeoisie to that of a corporate class – without the empirical sanction sought by Thompson – and in consequently defusing the historical value of working-class resistance (on account of its pre-Marxist ineffectiveness), Anderson and Nairn perform an exercise of theoretical closure with pervasive – and notorious – avatars, as we will see, in Thompson’s polemical *oeuvre*.

These authors’ analysis of the intellectual heritage of the British tradition entails a singularly crippling limitation to their argument. As Thompson argues, “after skipping over the entire phase of the heroic annunciation of bourgeois individualism, in which the English contribution, if somewhat late, was by no possible account negligible”,⁶⁷ Anderson and Nairn’s criticism of the nation’s intellectual insularity (resumed in the alternate poles of “traditionalism” and “empiricism”) goes on to blur and deprecate those native traditions by an exercise of extraction from their specific historical contexts. Notably (and we shall see the significance of this point for Thompson’s own historical and political appreciation of the Puritan revolutionary tradition), “to ignore the importance of the protestant and bourgeois-democratic inheritance” is, patently, to ignore the “historic strengths” of a particular conjuncture.⁶⁸ The object of Thompson’s

⁶⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 319

⁶⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 331

⁶⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 331

rebuke is obviously Anderson's foregoing claim that the "ideological legacy of the Revolution was almost nil":

All those sermons and pamphlets, all that prayer before battle, all that wrangling about oaths and altars and bishops, all that sectarian fragmentation, which Anderson finds so unenlightened, so sadly distanced from real economic motives, was in fact part of an epochal cultural confrontation. The English Revolution was fought out in religious terms, not because the participants were confused as to their real interests but because religion mattered... A man's right of property in his own conscience and religious allegiances had become just as real, and momentarily more real, than economic property rights. At this point in the growth of the human mind, the psychic crisis between old modes and new was exactly here.⁶⁹

Moreover, the contributions of this "premature" revolutionary outbreak were not necessarily structured or organised on a centralised or unitary model – as "an independent intellectual enclave" – but rather scattered across a "multiplicity of initiatives" and visions of systemic transformation which, in their particular (and assuredly, sometimes deluded) ways, all nurtured the imaginaries and intellectual universes of the English working class.⁷⁰

Anderson and Nairn's utilisation of the concept of hegemony in the context of this historical evolution is, according to Thompson, a scarcely useful attempt to reformulate old terms of description – and more often than not, commination – long brandished by the Left. Thus the terms "hegemonic" and "corporate", as these authors deploy them, can be rendered as the traditional distinction between "revolutionary" and

⁶⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 331-332

⁷⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 332, 335

“reformist”.⁷¹ Far from dispensing with the theory altogether, however, Thompson confronts the central term itself – Gramsci’s *egemonia* –, wresting it from the unhistorical formalisation to which Anderson and Nairn subject it: “it would be unfortunate if this man-handling of the concept were to distract attention from Gramsci’s deeply cultured and original (if frequently ambiguous) insights. Gramsci wrote, not about hegemonic classes but the hegemony of a class”.⁷²

By ‘hegemony’ Gramsci seems to mean a socio-political situation, in his terminology a ‘moment’, in which the philosophy and practice of a society fuse or are in equilibrium; an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation.⁷³

The danger implicit in Anderson’s description of hegemonic and corporate classes in the context of British historical development is that it “fails to give adequate weight not only to the sociological strengths of British reformism but also to its real achievements.”⁷⁴ These strengths, even taken within their objective historical limitations, are nevertheless undeniable. But these authors’ corollary is, in the sense suggested by Thompson, the natural outcome of a ritual formalisation of theory (an excessively static and mechanistic application of the “model”) which fails to account for *processes* in their actual dynamic complexity. This theoretical snare, claims Thompson, is by no means an intrinsic consequence of the notion of hegemony as defined above,

⁷¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 345

⁷² Thompson, *ibid.*, 346

⁷³ Gwyn A. Williams, quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, 346

⁷⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 346

but a crippling derivative of an axiomatic tendency in certain Marxisms.⁷⁵ Thus “[n]othing is more easy than to take a model *to* the proliferating growth of actuality, and to select from it only such evidence as is in conformity with the principles of selection.”⁷⁶

This dangerous proclivity, warns Thompson, was notoriously characteristic of Marxist orthodoxy in the bleakest years of the Communist movement. It is an insistent tendency in economism and those theoretical reductionisms which fail to account for the inherently complex distributions of non-economic phenomena in human history. It is therefore crucial to “remember that social and cultural phenomena do not trail after the economic at some remote remove: they are, at their source, immersed in the same nexus of relationship”; and moreover, that much historically significant opposition to capitalism is articulated as an overt “resistance to capitalism’s innate tendency to reduce all human relationships to economic definitions.”⁷⁷ Although Thompson refrains from explicitly linking Anderson and Nairn’s variety of Gramscism (or pseudo-Gramscism) to the extensive notion of “Stalinism” which consistently informs his polemical arsenal,⁷⁸ the basic outline of his famous engagement with Marxist “high theory” and of his identification, in the work of Louis Althusser and his School, of precisely the sort of

⁷⁵ As Dennis Dworkin has pointed out, “Thompson’s theoretical defense of “class struggle” was closely related to his adaptation of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. We have noted Thompson’s belief that many among the intellectual Left equated hegemony with ideological domination and consequently shunned democratic politics and traditions... [however,] Thompson maintained that hegemony implied struggle and resistance, and, as a consequence, the term argued for contesting bourgeois definitions of democracy, the state, and the law.” Dworkin, *ibid.*, 212-213. Thompson’s writings on the eighteenth century are particularly vocal about the need to conceive of hegemony as an “order of struggle”, rather than as a state of “acceptance by the poor of the gentry’s paternalism upon the gentry’s own terms”, see Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 20-21. See also, E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origins of the Black Act* (London: Allen Lane, 1975); *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991)

⁷⁶ Thompson, “Peculiarities of the English”, 350

⁷⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 356

⁷⁸ Although there is a somewhat overt hint towards the end of “Peculiarities of the English”, especially in his confrontation of Nairn’s “tone”: “[i]t was that tone – that sound of bolts being shot against imagination and enquiry that impelled some of us to proclaim the necessity for a New Left in 1956.” Thompson, *ibid.*, 359

intellectual rigidity which stood behind the break of 1956, is already laid down in this famous exchange with the younger New Left.

3. History, Utopia and the Limits of Theory

Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) was a late vindication of the foundational urge which had animated the Party Historians' Group as well as an idiosyncratic refutation of a theoretical lineage which, in its dogmatic commitment to orthodoxy, was seen as inimical to the epistemological specificity of its historical object. According to Thompson, Theory's assault upon the matter of History (capitalisation is Thompson's) implies a renunciation of historical materialism and a reification of Marxism's political horizon and logical terminus (human emancipation). As he puts it early on in the essay: "Althusser and his acolytes challenge, centrally, historical materialism itself. They do not offer to modify it but to displace it. In exchange they offer an a-historical theoreticism which, at the first examination, discloses itself as idealism."¹

A central aspect of Thompson's indictment of Althusser and his brand of Marxism is the claim that the latter's epistemology lacks a necessary – for the specific tasks of historical inquiry – category of "experience" (which, as we have seen, plays a fundamental practical role in his more historiographic work), that is, a dynamic understanding of "social being's impingement upon social consciousness".² As a result, his conclusions "falsify" the "dialogue with empirical evidence" (the productive condition of historical knowledge) confusing method with epistemology (i.e. the empirical confrontation of analytical categories with "empiricism" as a specific ideological formation). The peculiarity of historical endeavour resides, according to

¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: The Merlin Press, 1995 [1978]), 5

² Thompson, *ibid.*, 6

Thompson, in the intrinsic mobility of its object and in its irreducibility to the inertia of a philosophical given. For the historian, a daily engagement with social processes – with the ever shifting mass of stirrings and mutations in “social being” – compels an awareness of the radical impermanence of its associated consciousness. “Experience” introduces a medial function in the organisation of social consciousness, acting as a determining factor in its constitution and responding, in the first instance, to social transformations of an objective kind. Historical experience is then, in a sense, inextricable from the provision of “raw materials” upon which intellectual or scientific elaboration subsequently builds. However, and this is the critical point which misses the structuralist eye, experience “does not arrive obediently in the way that Althusser proposes”.³ Rather, it “walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide”.⁴

Althusser’s approach to History consists of a series of self-validating and notoriously “a-historical” logical steps: first, Theory posits the “existence” of an external – material – world of social reality whose determination is “in the last instance” economic. This claim is supported, not by any demonstrative footwork of its own, but by authoritative reference to Marx’s mature work – that is, by recourse to a received set of conclusions constituted as “knowledge”, which it is the specific philosophical task of the historical materialist to confirm and enhance in their self-referentiality. Thus, Marx’s work reaches the Althusserian laboratory as “raw material” – in what is called Generalities I –; it is then scrutinised by the analytical apparel of the philosopher “according to principles of ‘science’ derived from its mature *aperçus*, unstated assumptions, implicit methodologies, etc.” – at the level denominated Generalities II – only to be reinvested as “concrete knowledge” in a basic restatement of the preliminary

³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 10

⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 11

Marxian postulates in Generalities III.⁵ The logical articulation of this epistemology is thus exemplary of a marked strand in philosophy committed to the obfuscation of its declared object of study through the production of self-serving thought-processes. This, according to Thompson, is best described by the term “idealism”: “[s]uch idealism consists, not in the positing or denial of the primacy of an ulterior material world, but in a self-generating conceptual universe which imposes its own ideality upon the phenomena of material and social existence, rather than engaging in continual dialogue with these.”⁶

All throughout his polemic, Thompson is concerned with the loss of historical relevancy (of context-specific rapports) at the hands of philosophical formalism, which he perceives to be a looming temptation, throughout the Marxist tradition commencing with Marx himself, to gradually obfuscate the historically informed critique of Classical Political Economy (as consecrated by Smith, Ricardo and Malthus) into a static system of immutable categories and laws.⁷ This is precisely the solipsistic gesture replicated by Althusser: a gesture, however, for whose inception he cannot be held exclusively responsible. Thus, in Thompson’s opinion, Marx himself:

[W]as *caught into a trap*: the trap baited by ‘Political Economy’... he had been sucked into a theoretical whirlpool... Value, capital, labour, money, value, reappear again and again, are interrogated, re-categorised, only to come round once more on the revolving currents in the same old forms, for the same interrogation.⁸

⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 16

⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 18

⁷ “If categories change as the object changes, according to a ‘coefficient of mobility’, then science or Theory are lost; we drift among the tides of phenomena”, Thompson, *ibid.*, 76

⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 80

The inevitability or theoretical necessity of this immanent bent is disputed on the grounds that Marx's absorption into the ideational system of Political Economy was consequent upon his entry into that conceptual universe. Before that moment, this "structure" (Political Economy) "appeared to Marx as ideology, or, worse, apologetics".⁹ Once "inside" the system, however, the epistemological hierarchies of his critical target became the conceptual boundaries within which he was constrained to operate. Thus, "the economy" or "the economic" – the cornerstone of this discursive structure – supplied the parameters and the limits of his inquiry. The leap from *Capital* to *capitalism* – according to Thompson, the a-historical transgression initiated by and consummated beyond Marx – reveals the intrinsic idealism of a strategy which lacks the resources to account for a reality (essentially mobile, fluid and complex) beyond its scope. It purports to extend a restricted conceptuality (the province of Political Economy) to the whole of society "conceived as an 'organic system'". And yet, "the whole of society comprises many activities and relations (of power, of consciousness, sexual, cultural, normative) which are not the concern of Political Economy, which have been *defined out of* Political Economy, and for which it has no terms."¹⁰

The question of agency is very much at stake in the conceptual ratio between structure and process, between a disembodied yet determining sphere of rational mechanisms and the irreducible fluctuation of historical events. For Althusser, "what makes *such and such* an event *historical* is not the fact that it is an *event*, but precisely its *insertion into forms which are themselves historical*".¹¹ In other words, historical process is subsumed within overarching structures (modes of production, social

⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 81

¹⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 84. This, as we have seen, was a central aspect of Thompson's critique of Anderson and Nairn's schematic interpretation of English historical developments – especially those concerning the working class – since the Revolution.

¹¹ Quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, 121

formations) whose genesis as historical eventuation is altogether unclear and whose nominal exclusion of measurable – empirical – human agency qua determining factor is complete. This “eviction” is central to the conceptual articulation of Althusser’s structuralism, which is, “like all structuralisms, a system of *closure*”: “[i]t fails to effect the distinction between structured process, which, while subject to determinate pressures, remains open-ended and only partially-determined, and a structured whole, within which process is encapsulated”.¹² The latter inevitably reduces the role and scope of particular human agents to a negligible accident in the determination of historical events, and confines historical conjunctures to an eminently anti-historical stasis of “multiple subordinate and dominant determinations” rather than rendering them as the fluid and ever dynamic substance which transpires from concrete historical analysis. From this latter perspective, each moment, each particular “now” transacts as a “moment of *becoming*, of alternative possibilities, of ascendant and descendant forces”.¹³ As Thompson remarks, between these two conceptions of History – one privileging process as an irreducible dynamic and the other projecting structural determinations over agency – lies the “unbridgeable gulf” separating “Necessity (or Vico’s divine will) and Morris’s ever-baffled but ever-resurgent human agents.”¹⁴

The notion of class is (here and, as we have seen, everywhere in Thompson’s *oeuvre*) a precise locus in which the dynamic ontology of historical process is played out. In a conceptual elaboration which takes up the better part of Thompson’s intellectual engagement, class is articulated “at the intersection of determination and self-activity”, a fundamental premise of historical materialism combining the

¹² Thompson, *ibid.*, 137

¹³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 138

¹⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 138

determinate profile of given material conditions and the open structure of “becoming”.¹⁵ Class cannot be deduced “from a static ‘section’ (since it is a *becoming* over time), nor as a function of a mode of production, since class formations and class consciousness (while subject to determinate pressures) eventuate in an open-ended process of *relationship* – of struggle with other classes – over time.”¹⁶ The term “becoming” acquires a specific relevance in this context, as the touchstone of an epistemological reversal (of Theory) on the basis of which a distinctive articulation of the Marxist heritage may be achieved. This notion of “becoming” is furthermore invested with a dense referential content derived from an alternative, “possibilistic” stock of philosophy (notably from the contemporaneous work of Deleuze and Guattari),¹⁷ and to whose outer remit Thompson’s thought is unlikely to have remained immune.

Althusserian structuralism, in its obstinate assault upon historical dynamics, reproduces a general paralysis of thought which earlier brands of Marxism had systematically turned into practical-political rigidity. “Stalinism” functions in this particular context, and in the ensemble of Thompson’s work, as a category of political and epistemological censure denoting an adherence to crippling orthodoxy. The term becomes synonymous with any active production of theoretical obfuscation substituting conceptual stasis for the supple forms of socially and politically relevant analysis and parading a stale rhetoric of “Science” against a background of human devastation.

Thompson’s conflation of a specific historical constellation (Stalinism) with the philosophical developments of the Marxian tradition found in Althusser’s work has been strongly criticised by Perry Anderson in his book *Arguments Within English*

¹⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 142

¹⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 143

¹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972) and *Mille Plateaux* (Paris : Minuit, 1980). See also Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris : Union générale d’éditions, 1973), *Économie libidinale* (Paris : Minuit, 1974)

Marxism on account of its alleged disregard for context and, especially, for the particular historical background against which Althusser's intervention must be placed.¹⁸ Anderson makes a fair point of this silencing or overlooking of a crucial conjuncture which should not have escaped the attention of a historian concerned with empirical verification. However, the validity of Thompson's imputations – and generally, of his capacious notion of Stalinism – must be assessed within the parameters of his own *experience* and of the historical process with which it is involved – if this analytical category is to be granted the epistemological and ethical prominence it claims within his work. So here we begin to divine the lineaments of Thompson's overall strategy, as being less concerned with exposing a vitiated philosophical paradigm in *The Poverty of Theory* than with promoting a utopian vision whose ethical, political and epistemological continuities are firmly rooted in and evolved from the foundational moment of his political "awakening" in 1956 – the year of the "double exposure" of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution.

This principled indictment of Stalinism as an expansive phenomenon of noxious political practice and crippling intellectual construction had its first full-scale formulation in an article published in *The New Reasoner* in 1957.¹⁹ This early articulation of Thompson's long-term political agenda announced some of the terms which would subsequently accommodate his scathing critique of structuralist "idealism", including a rejection of "the dogmatism and abstractions of the heart" and

¹⁸ Thus, according to Anderson, the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1960 constitutes the "founding moment of Althusser's work", providing the "real political background to the writing of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*". His early work, especially, "was aimed at the Russian line internationally, and nationally at much of the official culture of the PCF, from a position sympathetic to the Chinese." Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 106-107

¹⁹ See Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995)

an advocacy, in their stead, “of a warm, personal and humane socialist morality.”²⁰ The language of morality so ardently invoked by Thompson in 1957 and then resumed with such vigour in 1978 must be envisaged as the central constituency of his approach to Marxism. As we are told in the final pages of *The Poverty of Theory*:

There are *two* traditions, whose bifurcation and disengagement from each other has been slow, and whose final declaration of irreconcilable antagonism was delayed – as an historical event – until 1956... Libertarian Communism, and the socialist and Labour movement in general, can have no business with theoretical practice except to expose it and drive it out.²¹

The events of 1956 brought lingering assumptions concocted in the Stalinist mode to an abrupt end. The proven inability to process internal dissent and the abject submission to Soviet dictate cast the British Communist Party in the dim light of unregenerate dogmatism. As we have noted, historians were at the forefront of protest and opposition to official policy in a relatively solid front of internal resistance. The Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Revolution prompted a letter – signed by Hobsbawm, Hill, Hilton and Kiernan, among others – in which the Party’s consistent manipulation and repression of dissidence was acerbically denounced as an “undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact, and the failure by British Communists to think out political problems for themselves.”²² A searching commitment to moral thinking – in other words, to the avoidance of “tactical” falsity as practised by official Communism – similarly lay at the root of the most remarkable venture in intellectual dissidence to emerge out of the CPGB in the 1950s: E.P. Thompson and John Saville’s *The Reasoner*.

²⁰ E.P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”, *The New Reasoner* no.1 (Summer 1957), 115-116

²¹ Thompson, *Poverty*, 254

²² Dworkin, *ibid.*, 47

This editorial undertaking was preceded by clamouring denunciations, by both Saville and Thompson, of Party intransigence. In a notorious article submitted to *World News and Views* (a leading forum of Party debate), entitled “Winter Wheat in Omsk”, Thompson made no effort to disguise his vexation at what he considered, quoting Milton, the Janus face of “rigid external formality” and “gross conforming stupidity”, as displayed by Party strategists:

Comrade John Saville, in a recent letter, referred to the weakening tradition of controversy in the Party in recent years. This is true. How often has the routine of the unanimous vote, the common front against the class enemy, the search ‘for the correct formulation’, inhibited the development of sharp controversy.

Year after year the Monolith, from its cave somewhere inside *For a Lasting Peace, For a People’s Democracy*, has droned on in a dogmatic monotone, without individual variation, without moral inflexion, without native dialect.²³

The article sparked immediate controversy within the Political Committee and was consequently “edited” from its original word count of 1,700 to a bare 1,000, in an unequivocal gesture of censorship. Thompson’s argument was self-styled as a re-connection with the ancestry of British radical discourse, with the moral militancy of Lilburne, Winstanley, Cobbett, Ernest Jones, William Morris and Tom Mann – a committed invocation, in sum, of those native forbears of the British anti-capitalist tradition of whom the CPGB claimed to be the rightful successor.²⁴ An earnest and passionate adjuration which, predictably, fell on deaf ears as the Party’s Executive

²³ Quoted in Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 145

²⁴ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 146

Committee “droned on” in a characteristic disregard for “native dialect”. Saville and Thompson’s response to the Party’s obduracy came in July 1956, with the publication of the first issue of their “Journal of Discussion”. This remarkable editorial venture – thirty-two mimeographed pages produced between Halifax and Hull, where Thompson and Saville lived, respectively –²⁵ borrowed its title from an early nineteenth-century Jacobin publication by John Bone and stamped its combative rationale with a telling epigraph by Marx: “[t]o leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality.”

The declared aim of *The Reasoner*, as stated in the first issue, was to “perform a practical service in loosening up the constricted forms within which discussion between Communists has taken place in recent years.”²⁶ In other words, the journal sought to take issue with Stalinism in all its width and breadth, not only as a “political philosophy” of arid theoretical resources, but most critically, as an “organisational logic” designed to stifle the free expression of intellectual liberty.²⁷ So-called “democratic centralism”, the strategic cornerstone of Communist organisation, was therefore attacked on the argument that a basic incompatibility existed between the policy of submission to “majority” rule (that is, to the hierarchical imposition of executive dictate) and respect for alleged “freedom of discussion” as encapsulated in the formula of democratic centralism itself: “freedom of discussion, unity of action”.

In all, a total of three issues appeared, in July, September and a final number intended for October, which finally appeared in November. Disciplinary action was immediately taken against the editors, and a District meeting was held with the Yorkshire branch in August. Both Saville and Thompson, present at the said meeting, refused to comply with instructions to cease publication of *The Reasoner*. The editors

²⁵ Dworkin, *ibid.*, 48; Woodhams, *ibid.*, 127

²⁶ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 146

²⁷ Kenny, *ibid.*, 17

were subsequently called to the Party Headquarters in London, where the demand made by the District Committee was reiterated. By 5 September, however, as a letter published in *World News* specified, a second issue was “in active preparation”.²⁸

The events of late October in Hungary precipitated the resolution of a tense series of exchanges between the journal editors and the Party Executive. A third and final number of *The Reasoner* appeared on 4 November, which clearly revealed the stalemate reached by dissidents and Party officials: the slim phrasing of the planned version for this last issue – drafted in October – underwent last-minute changes to include an article, “Through the Smoke of Budapest”, in which Thompson expounded the qualitative leap implicitly rehearsed by the international situation – the consequential passage from Stalinist checks on freedom to Stalinist tanks in the streets:

I had intended in this article to attempt some definitions of Stalinism, to enter into some questions of theory which our British leadership refuses to discuss, and to consult with readers upon the best way to rid our party of Stalinist theory and practice.

But these points of theory have now found dramatic expression in the great square of Warsaw and amid the smoke of Budapest. It is difficult to speak at all in the teeth of a whirlwind. And if we have helped, in some small degree, to sow the wind, do we have the right to speak?²⁹

The breach had been consummated and temporal suspension from militancy ensued. However, by the time of publication, both Thompson and Saville had reached the

²⁸ Woodhams, *ibid.*, 137-138

²⁹ Quoted in Woodhams, *ibid.*, 141

conclusion that the Party was unreformable, and presented their resignation in writing on 14 November.³⁰

With this departure from institutional Communism, Thompson and Saville embarked upon a new editorial project which would ultimately lead to the constitution of a reformulated brand of radicalism. *The New Reasoner* – significantly subtitled *A Journal of Socialist Humanism*, first appeared in the summer of 1957.³¹ It arose directly from the stem and the substance of debate conducted by its forerunner, whilst expanding the scope of thematic engagement with a wide range of interests, from art and literary criticism to creative writing and political argument proper. Doctrinally, Thompson and Saville steered the new publication firmly in the direction of de-Stalinisation, in a double operation of theoretical definition (of the Stalinist “phenomenon” as such) and critical veering towards a “native” idiom of Communism.

The political and intellectual co-ordinates of *The New Reasoner* were situated, according to its first editorial, between the “traditionally pragmatic and anti-theoretical bias of the British labour movement” and the parallel fossilisations of international Marxism secured by the “state orthodoxy” of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, on the one hand, and by “dogmatic Trotskyism”, on the other. The editors justified their intervention as a necessary bridge between the “intuitive” logic of left-wing Labourism (consecrated in *Tribune* and buttressed by the “robust intuition of Mr. Bevan”) and “that great body of socialists who desire not only to act but also to understand the context and aim of their actions.”³²

In his inaugural intervention, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”, Thompson offered a systematic analysis of Stalinism and a vindication of the

³⁰ Laybourn and Murphy, *ibid.*, 147

³¹ See also John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2002)

³² John Saville and E.P. Thompson, “Editorial”, *The New Reasoner*, no. 1 (Summer 1957)

“humanism” intrinsic to the socialist tradition. His polemic begins with a characterisation of Stalinism as an ideology in the classic Marxist sense, that is, as “a constellation of partisan attitudes and false, or partially false, ideas.”³³ Stalinism originated as a fossilisation of certain tendencies already present in the international working-class movement – in particular, a propensity to rely on the collective institution (the union, the party) in defiance of characteristically middle-class expressions of “individualism”. Thompson sees the vitiated base/superstructure model in its mechanical Stalinist inflection as providing the theoretical template for a calculated flourishing of dogma. Under its conceptual sphere, the free, dynamic and creative flow of ideas which consciously intervene upon social phenomena, are reduced to pallid reflections of a “semi-automatic” mechanism:

Thus, conscious processes of intellectual conflict were seen not as agencies in the making of history but as an irritating penumbra of illusions, or imperfect reflections, trailing behind economic forces. The ideas of critics or opponents were, and are, seen as symptoms of bourgeois conspiracy or penetration, targets for abuse, or fear, or suspicion.³⁴

This anti-intellectual inertia gravitates towards a fetishistic concern for impersonal abstractions and partisan generalisations, a manic adeptness at “iron laws” and processes in opposition to the free agency of concrete, situation-bound, human beings.

The deficient “reflection model” fails to account for the fluid emergence of new ideas in any given historical situation: “it is of first importance that men do not only “reflect” experience passively; they also think about that experience; and their thinking

³³ Thompson, “Socialist Humanism”, 108

³⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 111

affects the way they act.”³⁵ Thompson goes on to concede that the theoretical construct of base and superstructure, even if it was never intended as a mechanical gauge by Marx and Engels, is nevertheless constitutionally flawed, even in its didactic-metaphorical sense, lending itself to the sort of deterministic misappropriation deployed by Stalinism: “In fact, no such basis and superstructure ever existed”, for the only real, observable, unit in historical social relations (however linked to the “development of the productive forces”) remains concrete human agency.³⁶ It is this conscious engagement in specific actions which effectively makes up the economic base, as the latter is ultimately composed of relations from which human experience (concrete, measurable, experience) is by no means absent. Stalinism turned a mechanistic reflex into a convenient form of control: seen through the narrow prism of economic determinism, the free flow of ideas inherent to intellectual activity was unequivocally interpreted “as the last desperate rallying of an old “superstructure””.³⁷ Ideas were thus evicted from the realm of agency and consigned to the sphere of symptoms – mirror-images in a pre-determined system of precise correspondences.

Sins in theory were not, however, without consequence in the plane of morals. Anti-intellectualism (a deeply ingrained prejudice against “ideas”) coalesced in practical terms as moral “partisanship”, as an organic dependency on the bureaucratic apparatus of Party and State. Theoretical dogma paved the way for a radical dehumanisation of moral judgements, turning concrete human beings – again – into the impersonal tools of abstract historical processes.³⁸ Totalitarian practices were thus aided by an ideology which had first managed to exclude life from its framework, laying the foundations of a vicious edifice of self-deceit and manipulation. For there is a very real sense, claims

³⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 113

³⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 113

³⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 114

³⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 121

Thompson, in which Stalinist ideology, “like all ideologies”, functioned as a form of “self-alienation”, deriving inhumane rules of action (such as those consecrated by “democratic centralism”) from the lifeless inertia of abstractions and quasi-natural laws (“it is far easier to be inhumane if one takes a non-human model”).³⁹

Thompson’s renunciation of Theory and dogma (in an often insinuated identification which connects the direct political concerns of the late 1950s to his later scholarly polemics) and his resulting postulation of Socialist commitment as an inherently “libertarian” endeavour need not be seen, however, as a dangerous retreat into irrationalism.⁴⁰ The moralistic fibre of his polemical thrust is principally developed from William Morris and a native English utopian tradition whose intellectual credentials and resulting conceptuality (however “voluntaristic”) thoroughly shape his epistemology and political vision (whereby the categories of “experience” and “agency” join forces to offer an integrated dynamic of social and historical process).⁴¹

In effect, the inescapable locus of Thompson’s *oeuvre* remains his enduring – and evolving – engagement with Morris, commencing at (or shortly before) the time of his “socialist humanist” *prise de conscience* in 1956. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, a massive volume of literary and social history, was originally published in 1955 and it both heralded and pre-dated by a number of years the great cultural breakthrough associated with the publication of Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*. It has been suggested that, for all its originality and intellectual prescience, its failure to make an impact and rise to emblematic prominence as a landmark of the emergent concern with culture is directly

³⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 114

⁴⁰ This is the accusation made by Anderson in *Arguments*, 161

⁴¹ For more on the “utopianism” of this tradition and Thompson’s engagement with it, see Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 106-130

related to its historical conjuncture (which inevitably informs its argument) and genealogical position as a pre-56 Communist book.⁴²

Thompson's principal aim in *William Morris* is to salvage a specifically Morrisian heritage from the debilitating fixations of an intellectual posterity bent on trimming his politics of any uncomfortable trace of revolutionary commitment. According to Thompson this tendency had been on the rise virtually since the time of Morris's death in 1896, only reaching a contextually-motivated climax under the particular exigencies and circumstances of the Cold War. In the intervening years (especially the 1920s and 30s), "[h]is Socialism was generally understood to be little more than advanced democratic sentiments, given unusually practical expression, combined with medieval nostalgia and a Ruskinian hang-over."⁴³ Thompson is particularly critical of contemporary (that is, Cold War) attempts to normalise/stabilise Morris as an iconic referent for Labour's ideological project, turning him into a virtual proponent of social democratic moderatism and the Welfare State, and even, by implication, of Britain's Atlanticist policy of alliances. One such (mis)leading contribution to the anti-revolutionary reception of Morris (one which Thompson takes to task with characteristic vitriol) is Lloyd Eric Grey's *William Morris: Prophet of England's New Order*.⁴⁴ Grey's book, conveniently publicised in Britain at a time of consolidation yet increasing self-questioning of Labour's reformist programme gave the lie, with a rising tide of official approval and canonising gestures, to Morris's Communist leanings in any sense which may suggest a deviation from the path pursued and enshrined by the Attlee government. Thus, in Grey's estimation, "Morris was a

⁴² See John Goode, "E.P. Thompson and 'The Significance of Literature'", in Kaye and McClelland (eds.) *ibid.*, 190-191 and Anderson, *ibid.*, 157

⁴³ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), 741

⁴⁴ Lloyd Eric Grey, *William Morris: Prophet of England's New Order* (London: Cassell, 1949)

Socialist only in the etymological sense of believing that man must become a social animal.”⁴⁵

With regard to an alternative, yet equally reifying version of Morris’s “true” programme of social transformation, namely his alleged medievalism, Thompson was emphatic in pointing out the lines of divergence between an initial Ruskinism and the fully-fledged and consequential Socialism towards which his work progressed:

Where Ruskin had jabbed an indignant finger at capitalism and had often (guided by Carlyle’s wrath at the “cash-nexus”) indicated, in the worship of Mammon, the source of its degradation and horror, Morris was able in page after page of coherent and detailed historical exposition to reveal in the very processes of production, the common economic root both of capitalist exploitation and of the corruption of art. Where Ruskin had proceeded by intuition... Morris was able to lay bare the actual truth.⁴⁶

Thus Morris’s was not a contingent or aestheticising indictment of industrialism’s forms, but a principled critique and condemnation of capitalism as a particular historic formation in which production was conceived of “*primarily for profit and not for use*”.⁴⁷

In considering this first important work by Thompson one should note the simmering yet unstated antagonism contained in the text: that is, precisely, the vindication of Revolutionary Socialism concocted in an older and eminently anti-bureaucratic fashion, far removed in programme and temperament from the prevalent Communist logic of Zhdanovism and democratic centralism (with which his own

⁴⁵ Quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, 741

⁴⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 749

⁴⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 749

militancy and intellectual practice would soon clash with irreparable consequences). The Morrisian semblance offered by Thompson is composed of a deeply utopian and highly topical articulation of community and individuality, reaching beyond the conceptual stalemate of late Stalinism and Cold War liberalism. “This is important”, claims Thompson, “because (as Morris never ceased to repeat) true individualism was only possible in a Communist society, which needed and valued the contribution of each individual to the common good.”⁴⁸

All in all, the political opening which the events and experiences of 1956 would propel is embryonically contained in this 1955 pronouncement. A proto-programme for “socialist humanism” (beyond the stifling and, at best, uninspiring projects of official Communism) can be sensed in his appreciation of Morris’s anti-statist bias:

Thus Communist society implied the re-establishment of the personal and voluntary bonds of society and the disappearance of the impersonal and compulsive relations based on the ownership of property and the maintenance of class rule... The “withering away of the state” assumed great importance to Morris, not... as the absence of all social bonds, but in the positive sense of the re-establishment at a higher level than known before of the truly human and personal bonds existing even within a class society.⁴⁹

This “withering away” implied a pre-emption of the bureaucratic menace which, in Morris’s time, was principally associated with Fabian socialism. However, this imputation, when restated in 1955, cannot be restricted to the avowed Fabian target and its top-down conception of social transformation. The abstract machinery of State,

⁴⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 797

⁴⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 798

which the mass defection from the Party ranks a year later would fix in the new radical imaginaries as part and parcel of the Stalinist edifice, was already recognised, in abstract fashion, as intrinsically antinomical to the full and effective realisation of any Socialism worthy of the name. The “humanism” implicit in this anti-bureaucratic gesture of the Morris book is, as we have seen, an organic function of Thompson’s epistemology, as well as a defining political strategy with practical consequences all the way from the *New Reasoner* project to his polemic with Althusser.

In his discussion of Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, this humanism, whose many guises we have encountered in presumably inconsistent or impressionistic formulations, is made explicit as a particular “quality of life”: “Morris is not concerned with the mechanics of society but with the people – their relationships, their morality, their pleasure in the details of life.”⁵⁰ It is not the structural arrangement of a particular society which conceals the key to a redeemed life, but the specific density of desire with which that interpersonal texture is woven. What Morris’s craft reveals (coupled with a “scientific mastery of historical process”)⁵¹ is precisely the “realistic” ratio between a knowledge of degradation and a reckoning of possibility and emancipation.

A revised edition of *William Morris* was issued with a substantial postscript in 1977, inevitably catering for a radically different political atmosphere. As John Goode has noted, “this later text is in many ways a great improvement, shorter, less dogmatic, less strident, less given to covering its own doubts with colourful metaphor and rhetorical demolitions of easy targets”.⁵² Moreover, it constitutes, according to this author, a reduction of the initial problematic with which Morris was aligned, namely the “dialectic of necessity and desire”: “Morris, and *News from Nowhere* especially, is now

⁵⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 807

⁵¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 805

⁵² Goode, *ibid.*, 192

concerned with the “education of desire”, and desire itself is strongly activated against necessity. Thus Morris’s writing is about what “Marxism” fails to be, what lies beyond its power of rational explanation.”⁵³ In this light, Morris stands firmly on the side of a libertarian tradition inimical to the stifling routines of a static so-called rationalism and its attendant set of evictions from the plane of historical eventuation (agency, experience, morality etc).⁵⁴

The role accorded to desire in this update of the Morrisian heritage is fundamentally a reinscription of social phenomenality within the ontological margins of “becoming” (which, as we know, provided a dynamic antidote to Althusser’s anti-historicist stasis). The tenor of this new mobilisation of radical life (“germinal life”, one is tempted to say)⁵⁵ as against the paralysis of dogmatic anti-humanism projects a fresh problematisation of Morris’s status as a Marxist author according to the terms of definition laid down in 1955. Thus, in the important postscript which Thompson appended to the 1977 edition, he repudiates the simple equation Morris=Marx which many commentators had identified as the principal claim of the book:

The point was, rather, that Morris was an original Socialist thinker whose work was complementary to Marxism. And in repeated emphases, and in particular in the stress upon Morris’s genius as a moralist, it should not have been difficult for a sensitive reader to have detected a submerged argument within the orthodoxy to which I then belonged.⁵⁶

⁵³ Goode, *ibid.*, 192

⁵⁴ For more on the “libertarian” aspects of Morris and Thompson, see David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006); see also McCann, *ibid.*, esp. chapter 1

⁵⁵ See Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 1999)

⁵⁶ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin Press, 1977), 770

One of the key points in Thompson's argument (which makes him critical, for example, of an otherwise "weighty and often helpful" Morris study by Paul Meier)⁵⁷ concerns the role accorded to the Romantic tradition in relation to a radical materialist agenda. A disabling association of the old Romantic critique of industrialism with "idealism" in the derogatory Marxian sense privileged by orthodoxy impels Thompson to a rejection of this duality and a recognition of the limitations generated within the Marxist camp (from the 1890s onwards): "Morris's "conversion" to Marxism offered a juncture which Marxism failed to reciprocate".⁵⁸ Miguel Abensour's defence of Morris's utopian legacy – to which Thompson is largely sympathetic – contains a critical assessment of this enduring failure as it crystallises in the pronouncements of a certain brand of contemporary Marxism (the target is still Paul Meier's *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris*): "[w]hat Meier offers as a sympathetic appreciation of Utopianism is in effect an *exercise of closure*, confining the utopian imagination within textually-approved limits. Meier has been guilty of an exercise of theoretical repression."⁵⁹ An enabling reading of Morris's utopianism would therefore involve a rejection of received orthodoxies (such as Engels' scientific/utopian antinomy) and a radical revision of his Marxian premises in relation to the history of utopian forms after 1850.⁶⁰

The modalities of utopian imagination deployed by Morris are "deliberately evasive as to "arrangements"" and systematic elaborations or projections of achieved societal models:

Exactly for this reason he drew upon his Romantic inheritance of dream and of fantasy, accentuated further by the distancing of an archaic vocabulary...

⁵⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 782

⁵⁸ Thompson, *ibid.*, 786

⁵⁹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 789

⁶⁰ This "new Utopianism turned away from the forms of classical Utopianism – those of juridico-political model-building – and turned toward a more open heuristic model", Thompson, *ibid.*, 789

His intention was to embody in the forms of fantasy alternative values sketched in an alternative way of life... And what distinguishes this enterprise is, exactly, its *open*, speculative, quality, and its *detachment* of the imagination from the demands of conceptual precision.⁶¹

In short, the avoidance of “closure” – which is, in this context and as we have seen in *The Poverty of Theory*, Thompson’s shorthand for an often reifying tendency in speculative thought – demands a measured re-claiming of Morris’s utopianism as an integral (and by no means subordinate) part of his revolutionary programme. This utopianism is intimately connected to the “education of desire” or, in other words, to the latter’s disengagement from the syntax of necessity in which the historical forms of oppression keep it ensnared.

The apparent opposition between “rational explanation” (or “knowledge”) and “desire” in Thompson’s reconstruction of Morris’s Communism has also been criticised by Perry Anderson as an insinuation “in Thompson’s blameless text” of “a fashionable philosophy of Parisian irrationalism” and “a candid invitation to obscurantism”.⁶² However, the larger context provided by Thompson’s work since the early publication of his *William Morris* all the way through his bitter polemic against Althusser’s “orrery”⁶³ clearly points in a conceptual and ethical direction for which the post-1968 constellation of “desire” provides a supplementary mode of articulation yet no substantial tampering with the fundamental premises. On the contrary, we observe that the ontological language of “becoming” makes an apposite contribution to his long-standing promotion of a fluid – and genealogically Morrisian rather than Marxian –

⁶¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 790

⁶² Anderson, *ibid.*, 161

⁶³ The metaphor he employs to characterise the latter’s crusade against “historical process” and “agency” in the name of a superior mechanism of structural determination whereby “human practice is reified” and “in which all the bodies in the solar system revolve around the dominant sun”, Thompson, *Poverty*, 137

materialism. Thus, for example, the axiomatic assumption from which Deleuze and Guattari deploy their programme for “desiring machines” in their collaborative work (especially in *Anti-Oedipus*)⁶⁴ is, as Manola Antonioli has observed, “the great identity between social production and desiring production.”⁶⁵ The notion of “machine” is deployed in the Deleuzo-Guattarian canon as a tool of opposition to all contemporary structuralisms: it is, as they claim, a “non-discursive concept”, a productivity whose operative principle is the flux and whose rationale is consequently antagonistic to the hierarchical articulation of, for example, Althusser’s model of Science.⁶⁶ Thompson’s project of “socialist humanism” is precisely situated at the juncture of social and desiring production, an intensely context-bound discursive surface which would bear the characteristic inflections of his voice and commitment ever since 1956.

We could therefore conclude that this “machinic” eruption in the *William Morris* of 1977 is fundamentally coordinate with his anti-structuralist polemic of 1978. Both respond, in a characteristically Thompsonian idiom, to the pressing contextual challenges of theoretical dogma, on the one hand, and to the political urge to revitalise the discourse of utopia, on the other. Thompson’s stature as a radical public intellectual, even if initially marked by his brief association with the Communist Party Historians’ Group, was singularly defined by the momentous conjuncture of 1956 and the political and intellectual lessons derived from it. If we are to heed Thompson’s recommendations on historiographic method for a moment (and in particular that privileged object of his attention, “experience”), we may do well to revisit the doctrinal, epistemological, moral and psychological by-products of that fateful date as they shape and haunt the totality of

⁶⁴ And also very notably in Guattari’s writings. See for example, Félix Guattari, *La Révolution Moléculaire* (Fontenay-sous-Bois: Encre, 1977) and *Cartographies Schizoanalytiques* (Paris : Galilée, 1989)

⁶⁵ Manola Antonioli, *Géophilosophie de Deleuze et Guattari* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2003), 37

⁶⁶ It should also be noted that this conception of the machine is antinomial to the notion of mechanism which haunts Althusserian philosophy. See Antonioli, *ibid.*, 40

his work – from his engagement with the formative stages of the English working class to his late surge of antinomian enthusiasm.

4. Humanism Revisited: Antinomians and Aliens in Thompson's Later Work

Witness Against the Beast constitutes Thompson's last recapitulation of oppositional themes and practices. If William Morris had served as an initial springboard and source of inspiration for a topical derivation of revolutionary ideas and sentiments, the late antinomian poetry of William Blake provided a final distillation of native English subversion and a propitious summation of core elements in Thompson's distinctively libertarian brand of Socialism.

Thompson's affinity with the various moments of doctrinal insurrection traced throughout the English Revolution and beyond is actualised and asserted to the point that it effectively redefines, in his later years, the tone and pitch of his political idiom:

I have already suggested, in discussing justification by faith, that the antinomian position was consciously anti-hegemonic. That is, if we accept the view that in most societies we can observe an intellectual as well as institutional hegemony, or dominant discourse, which imposes a structure of ideas and beliefs... a structure which serves to consolidate the existent social order, enforce its priorities, and which is itself enforced by rewards and penalties, by notions of 'reputability', and (in Blake's time) by liberal patronage or by its absence – if we accept this large mouthful, then we can

see that these antinomian sects were hegemony's eighteenth-century opposition.¹

A relatively simplified definition of hegemony (which contrasts with the Gramscian or near-Gramscian debate with Anderson and Nairn) emerges from this description of dominant and oppositional practices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English culture. Thompson turns, in this late statement of principle, towards a decidedly atheoretical brand of programmatic "humanism" which he no longer feels in need of justifying within the parameters of Marxian conceptuality. Characteristically, the Blake book is a militant redeployment of the values of "1956", a compelling confirmation of his organising themes, which the intervening years of struggle and commitment to the peace movement appear to have liberated of the epistemological burdens of self-definition.² Most tellingly, *Witness Against the Beast*, in joining the emphases and adopting the accents of some of the more libertarian strands in British Marxist historiography – the "productive conditions" of his own emergence as a Communist intellectual in the mid-Fifties – re-locates Thompson in an "old dissenting" lineage of radicalism which ends up informing the "utopian" approach, choice of subject and ethico-political corollary.

The precise ideological location of the dissident sects and creeds in the power structure of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England was unmistakably interpreted (by Thompson and others) as that of an internal systemic contradiction endowed with varying indices of utopian referentiality. Thompson draws a common line of doctrinal

¹ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1993), 108-109

² Since around the time of publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson would become the leading British figure in the movement for nuclear disarmament. His public activity was accompanied by numerous topical publications. See, *inter alia*, the essays collected in E.P. Thompson, *Writing By Candlelight* (London: Merlin Press, 1980); E.P. Thompson, *Zero Option* (London: Merlin Press, 1982); E.P. Thompson, *Double Exposure* (London: Merlin Press, 1985); E.P. Thompson (ed.), *Star Wars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)

opposition to the dominant role accorded to the “Mosaic” or “Moral” Law in the Protestant orthodoxy (or orthodoxies). What this antinomian challenge performed was a radical interpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and a full extension of the logic of predestination. In some extreme variants, such as that represented in the 1650s by the Ranters, predestinarian beliefs resulted in a wholesale rejection of the concept of sin.³

The ebullience of radical ideas during the Revolutionary period of the 1640s had given rise to an oppositional escalation against clerical control and intervention in religious affairs at the behest of the Presbyterian majority within the Parliamentary party. The moral discipline exerted by this dominant clergy was experienced as a severe recrudescence of pre-1640 ecclesiastical controls.⁴ This institutional redeployment of an old adherence to the Mosaic Law generated, among radical Protestants, a bitter sense of disaffection and an increasingly overt antagonism towards the clerical remnants of the Elizabethan period. Congregationalist feeling among many of these radicals implied that social control could no longer be exercised by reference to an external, heteronomous magistracy and thus, that only the self-appointed communion of the elect could suffer to mete out penalties against the deviant. This gathering hostility towards clerical and legal mediation built consistently upon the earliest teachings of Protestantism. As Christopher Hill has pointed out, “Calvin had opened a wide door when he wrote that since believers “have derived authority from Christ not to entangle themselves by the

³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 22-32; see also A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) and Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972)

⁴ Hill, *ibid.*, 159

observance of things in which he wished them to be free, we conclude that their consciences are exempted from all human authority””.⁵

In the more “heretical” readings of this Protestant line of interpretation, the Moral Law was divested of all binding effectivity in favour of an autonomous flowering of the Gospel. This idea recurs frequently, and in various forms, in doctrinal writings of the 1640s and 50s. One fundamental derivation of this opposition to the Moral Law is the consequential problematisation of the doctrinal and social value of sin. Sin becomes associated, throughout the turbulent years of the Interregnum, and in the midst of this complex proliferation of theological thinking, with the more conservative sections of the Puritan movement and especially, with Presbyterian attempts, in the face of “republican” and “democratic” outbursts, to re-impose a backward-looking social and ideological order. In this context, antinomianism – or the wholesale rejection of submission to the Moral Law – proved a resilient alternative, especially among the popular classes, to the strictures of orthodox Calvinism.⁶ The main political problem posed by the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – as the radical sects of the mid-seventeenth century came to understand it – was that of determining the exact membership of the elect. For indeed, if external coercion could only be imposed upon the unregenerate, it was a matter of theological but also political urgency to determine precisely *who* fell without the boundaries of definition.

With the rapid radicalisation of ideas undergone in this period, older yet already well formed critical stances on these issues began to gain renewed currency. Tyndale’s heretical pronouncements of the sixteenth-century (in which he had declared a similar disavowal of the law and of the doctrine of sin) became fashionable again, as did a

⁵ Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (London: Allen Lane, 1996), 208-209

⁶ Hill, *ibid.*, 162

certain critical awareness – already circulated in the late Elizabethan period – that sin merely provided an excuse for the establishment of modern institutions such as the family, private property and the State.⁷ Understood in similarly materialist terms, the Fall revealed itself as the real outcome of ignorance and greed. In open defiance of the Calvinist thesis, humanity was therefore not corrupt at the root and thus inextricably bound to condemnation (except for a regenerate minority), but rather susceptible to temporal redemption. Francis Bacon, in a direct line of inheritance from magico-alchemical ideas, had argued for the perfectibility of man and for the possibility of recreating the lost Eden on Earth.⁸ This non-transcendental doctrine of redemption became increasingly popular, in a variety of declensions, during the years of the Civil War. The universalist implications of the radical assault upon sin multiplied amid the social and political convulsions. Thus the fundamental tenet of predestination could be adapted to an all-inclusive definition of saintliness. Richard Coppin went as far as declaring that, in effect, predestination did not concern a set of individuals against another, but a set of qualities (good and bad) within each man.⁹ The “True Leveller” or “Digger” Gerrard Winstanley could confidently assert, in 1648, that salvation was a universal destiny for all of humanity. In a germane emphasis, the Quaker leader George Fox announced that the light of God shone equally in every man and woman.¹⁰

The abolition of sin (and correspondingly, of damnation according to the orthodox definition) and the embrace of divine universalism, compounded with a belief in the temporal perfectibility of man, could sometimes approach the extremity of an atheistic, or more exactly, pantheistic corollary whereby the transcendental Christian God would be relocated in an extensive immanence, in all of Nature. Ranterism

⁷ Hill, *ibid.*, 161

⁸ Hill, *ibid.*, 164

⁹ Hill, *ibid.*, 166

¹⁰ Hill, *ibid.*, 166, 167

supplied a notorious instantiation of such immanence, whose logical terminus – via the negation of sin and the existence of Hell – was the actual celebration of any and every “sinful” or counter-normative conduct (especially sexual excess).¹¹ As the Ranter Lawrence Clarkson expressed it: “sin hath its conception only in the imagination... what act soever is done by thee in light and love, is light and lovely, though it be that act called adultery.”¹² Thompson pertinently notes in this respect that the Ranters’ “dispersed pantheism may flow logically into mortalism or even materialism, in which all life returns to a common source as streams to a sea. Or, in a more literal and intense variant, the essential presence of God is to be found only in men and women... hence these *are* God.”¹³

Gerrard Winstanley’s theologico-political ideas (which represent the egalitarian-communitarian zenith of this radical Puritan moment) are in direct conversation with this thesis. Thus, clearly, “God is not to be found ‘without you’, ‘at a distance’” but rather as an internalised manifestation – an inner principle branding each and every one of us as godly and therefore inherently regenerate.¹⁴ The “anointing” is the crucial concept. It signifies the union of Christ with the saints (or believers) – the union of “Christ in the saints”: “[w]hen the anointing hath made a oneness... God dwells and rules in man, and man lives in God.”¹⁵ Thus the individual lives a shared communion with the divine, turning the angst-ridden logic of predestination into an egalitarian and proto-materialist condition of universal redemption. For indeed, to “expect Christ to

¹¹ For a topical controversy surrounding the historiography of Ranterism, and in particular the twentieth-century ramifications into the political vaults of the Communist Party Historians Group, see J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1986) and Thompson’s irate reaction to its denials, E.P. Thompson, “On the Rant”, *London Review of Books* vol. 9, n.13 (9 July 1987), 9-10

¹² Quoted in Hill, *Liberty Against the Law*, 218

¹³ Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, 26

¹⁴ Christopher Hill, *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: Past and Present, 1978), 3

¹⁵ Hill, *ibid.*, 4

“come in one single person” is to “mistake the resurrection of Christ.”¹⁶ The latter must be experienced as a function of the anointing – a resurrection within. Consequently, as Hill points out, “[i]f the significant Christ is the Christ in us, then the Christ who died at Jerusalem diminishes in importance.”¹⁷ Similarly, the Scriptures and the Commandments become secondary in relation to the internal rise of Christ in sons and daughters. These are increasingly regarded, in the antinomian tradition, as interfering with the actual spiritual growth – with the mystical union that must occur within.

Winstanley’s more famous social-egalitarian conclusions are therefore part and parcel of a broad radical dedication to the idea of perfectibility and to the possibility of eradicating sin from the temporal world. The common ownership of the land upheld by the Digger experiment is a natural corollary to the doctrine of “Sonship”. The shared freedom of the Second Coming – the rise of Jesus Christ in all sons and daughters – must be extended to a common right to God’s creations: “[t]he message that Winstanley received in his trance was that men should break bread together and work together, and that they should not take hire. They should live and work in community, rejecting wage labour.”¹⁸ Winstanley identified the internal and mystical Second Coming of Christ within Man with the rise of Reason, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God with the extensive application of this divine Reason through the universal acceptance of community. The Digger God is thus, as Hill suggests, one of humanist immanence rather than of theistic transcendence – and indeed one very apposite to Thompson’s radical projections.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hill, *ibid.*, 6

¹⁷ Hill, *ibid.*, 14

¹⁸ Hill, *ibid.*, 26

¹⁹ Hill, *ibid.*, 30

Thompson's analysis of the antinomian tradition and its influence upon Blake locates the egalitarian emphasis (of which Winstanley constitutes perhaps the most advanced social instance) in a plurality of moments throughout the radical decades of 1640 and 1650. The radical egalitarianism of the antinomian conjuncture (or conjunctures) generated a deep-seated resistance to any legalistic/moralistic conception of spiritual life. In particular, the "ranting impulse" – as Thompson calls it – became pacified, after the suppression of the more extremist versions of theological rebellion in the central decades of the seventeenth century, into the sober religiosity of Quakerism, with its characteristic emphases on plainness (of speech, dress and manner), simplicity, universal salvation and the inner actuality of Christ's Second Coming, as an ever-present, unfolding process.²⁰ As Thompson emphasises, "the interpenetration of Ranting and Quaker notions is incontrovertible." Thus, for "many early Quakers, God was 'an infinite Spirit, that fills Heaven and Earth, and all Places and all things'".²¹ In other words, the radical quasi-panteism of some antinomian trends – those seeking to undermine the more anti-democratic contents of the Calvinist notion of predestination – did not disappear after the defeat of the Old Dissenting sects.

Thompson's Blakeian focus – in the attempt to construct an intellectual and theologico-political lineage connecting the 1650s to the 1790s – falls upon the small group of Puritan radicals gathered around Ludowick Muggleton and John Reeve: the Muggletonians. The emphatically anti-legalistic/moralistic accent of this group signifies a characteristic survival and continuity of the antinomian tradition, as well as a notable development of the same, into the intellectual climes of the following century. The

²⁰ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2008), 56. See also P. Dandelion, *Introduction to Quakerism* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2007) and Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: the Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000)

²¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 32

Muggletonian embodiment of the radical Christian tradition is centrally revealed in its emphasis on the opposition between the “Everlasting Gospel of Love” and the outward institutionality of the Moral Law. In its subsequent doctrinal development, Muggletonianism was to align this basic duality with a symptomatic antagonism towards the rationalistic hegemony of the eighteenth century, thereby representing a bulwark of core resistance to the civilising dynamics of the Enlightenment period:

The old seventeenth-century sects which survived into the new century faced the choice of submission to the rationalism and civilising modes of the time, with an accompanying upwards drift in the social status of their following – and this was the trajectory of Old Dissent in general, including those old opponents of the Muggletonians, the Quakers; or else of maintaining their original doctrinal integrity (and a diminishing familial and perhaps plebeian following) by ever-fiercer resistance to rationalism, to the polite theology of biblical criticism and to accommodation with Newtonian physics, and by ever-stronger insistence upon the virtues of faith, grace and purity of heart.²²

For the Muggletonians, the Moral Law was antagonistic to the gospel of faith and thus partook of human arrangements of a necessarily corrupt nature: “[t]he moral law was written in the nature of reason, and so had death written in it”: “[t]he law is not written in the seed of faith’s nature at all, but in the seed of reason’s nature only. Therefore the seed of faith is not under the law, but is above the law”.²³ According to Thompson, this position carries the essence of radical antinomianism into the hostile heartlands of the Age of Reason.

²² Thompson, *ibid.*, 86

²³ Quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, 92

By opposing the “basest and most oppressive of human codes” (“the laws of the Jews” to which official Christianity still held on), the “true saints” offered a final “remnant of the seed of faith” – a living testimony to the Gospel of the Lord. Cast in the light of the Christian Message of Love (the said Gospel), the Moral Law is revealed as the intrusive appurtenance of priests and temporal powers. The anti-hegemonic tenor of this opposition is intensified by Thompson’s contextualisation of theological antinomianism within the larger framework of a strengthening capitalist ideology. Thus the Muggletonian rebellion against Reason and external justification in the name of faith is juxtaposed to the “rationalising” dynamics of the dominant social order. As orthodox versions of Protestantism advance towards an increasingly beneficial accommodation with the political and economic hegemony, antinomian radicalism comes to epitomise an alternative stance penetrated by opposition values:

[A]ntinomianism’s intellectual doctrines (the suspicion of ‘reason’, justification by faith, hostility to the Moral Law) constituted in quietest periods a defence against the reigning hegemony, in more active periods a resource for an active critique not just of policies or personalities but of the deep assumptions of the social order.

And we can take this argument a little further. For what the antinomian or Muggletonian declaimed against as ‘Reason’ we might today prefer to define as ‘Ideology’, or as the compulsive constraints of the ruling ‘discourse’. Antinomian doctrine was expressive of a profound distrust of the ‘reasons’ of the genteel and comfortable, and of ecclesiastical and academic institutions, not so much because they produced false knowledges but because they offered specious apologetics (‘serpent reasonings’) for a rotten social order based, in the last resort, on violence and material self-

interest. In short, the antinomian stance was not against knowledge but against the ideological assumptions which pretended to be knowledge and the ideological contamination of the rest.²⁴

This sweeping characterisation of the precise political topology of antinomianism in the changed intellectual landscape of the eighteenth century brings Thompson's long-awaited engagement with Blake (and his general understanding of the English Revolution and its doctrinal offshoots) to bear on a more topical crusade of the contemporary Left. Thus the "true" Gospel of humanism had been mobilised in his polemical writings since his "Epistle to the Philistines" all the way to *The Poverty of Theory* in a vigorous attempt to counter a rising tide of "serpent reasonings" and theoretical manoeuvres to constrain and congeal the emancipatory imagination into a ready-made function of Ideology.

In his reading of Blake's poem "London", Thompson detects a "conjunction between the old antinomian tradition and Jacobinism", a confluence of radical strands bringing together two distinct idioms of oppositionality which enjoy a provisional – if precarious – alliance in the poem:

For while 'London' is a poem which a Jacobinical Londoner might have responded to and accepted, it is scarcely one which he could have written. The average supporter of the London Corresponding Society would not have written 'mind forg'd' (since the manacles would have been seen as wholly exterior, imposed by oppressive priestcraft and kingcraft); and the voice of indignation would probably have drowned the voice of compassion, since most Painites would have found it difficult to accept Blake's vision of

²⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 109

humankind as being simultaneously oppressed... and in a self-victimised or Fallen state. One might seem to contradict the other.²⁵

The analyses and solutions derived from the enlightened stock of Jacobinism would consequently fall short of the old antinomian commitment to justification by faith alone and its doctrine of Love. A fundamental resistance to outward control – handed down from the more libertarian quarters of the Dissenting tradition – is transmuted into a general distrust of the institutionality of positive power, however externally redeemed or reformed by the tools of Reason. For it is precisely the planted seeds of rational legislation – as opposed to the unconquerable and “saintly” domain of the inner faith – which continue to uphold the extant hierarchies and impositions of the temporal world: “[s]o that if Blake found congenial the Painite denunciation of the repressive institutions of State and Church, it did not follow that humanity’s redemption from this state could be effected by a political reorganisation of these institutions alone. There must be *some utopian leap, some human rebirth*, from Mystery to renewed imaginative life.”²⁶

The quasi-anarchistic implication of this emphasis, combined with the specific position accorded to Blake in Thompson’s later years (notably, the fact that the posthumously published *Witness Against the Beast* was several decades in the making) has led some commentators to stress Blake’s towering importance for Thompson. Thus, David Goodway writes: “I would therefore even go so far as to say that of the influences on Thompson’s career, Blake was more significant overall than Morris, and of equal importance to – probably even of more importance than – Marx.” And to that effect, he quotes Thompson’s 1973 remark that if “I devised my own pantheon I would without

²⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 193. The verse Thompson alludes to reads: “In every cry of every Man,/In every Infant’s cry of fear,/In every voice, in every ban,/The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.”, William Blake, “London”, in Bruce Woodcock (ed.) *The Selected Poems of William Blake* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 88

²⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 193, my emphasis

hesitation place within it the Christian antinomian, William Blake, and I would place him beside Marx.”²⁷

The validity of these claims can be easily tested by a brief – even cursory – acquaintance with Thompson’s only incursion into the realm of fiction. As Perry Anderson wrote in Thompson’s obituary, *The Sykaos Papers* represents “the most complete single statement of his thought, giving imaginative form to ideas that find comparable expression nowhere in his work.”²⁸ Bryan Palmer has likewise described the book as “perhaps the single richest elaboration of E.P. Thompson’s refusals.”²⁹ Published in 1988, *The Sykaos Papers* presents a near-future scenario of growing Cold War tension and eventual escalation between the Blocs. The arrival from the planet Oitar of poet/astronaut Oi Paz performs the double function of exposing the irrationalities (the “serpent reasonings”) of a consolidated Earth culture of “exterminism” and of accelerating the self-destructive process of human societies as they prove hopelessly unable to unite in the face of an external threat.³⁰

Thompson’s often comical portrayal of the Oitarian-human encounter offers a topical defamiliarisation of the cumulative absurdities of late capitalist hegemony (and its Communist counterpart behind the Iron Curtain). Oitarian culture is gradually construed and decoded through the medium of Oi Paz’s acculturation, most notably after the latter’s internment in a specifically designed – and secret – military station (Martagon Hall) where he becomes the object of study of anthropologist Helena Sage. In the midst of nuclear war preparations following a toughening of political positions after the Reagan-Thatcher years and after the defeat of Gorbachev’s liberal reforms in

²⁷ Goodway, *ibid.*, 281

²⁸ Perry Anderson, “Diary”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 15, n. 20 (21 October 1993), 24-25

²⁹ Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 155

³⁰ See also E.P. Thompson, *Exterminism and Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1982)

the Soviet Union, the group of researchers and caretakers around Oi Paz and Helena become insulated in an area of exemption – a “zone of Eden” – within Martagon Hall which eventually acquires symbolic immunity to the soaring bellicosity induced by the Oitarian determination to colonise the Earth.

The series of transfers and exchanges which constitute the main body of the novel reveal an irreconcilable polarity of cultural determinations between Oitar and Earth. This juxtaposition of mutual aliens constructs a set of mirror-images through which Thompson belabours his radical oppositional point. The culture of Oitar is presented as fully programmed and lacking in notions of freedom and choice – an enacted script characterised by social harmony and a blind subservience to a superior principle of rational order with deistic overtones (the Wheel). Seen through Oi Paz’s prism, the culture of Sykaos (Earth) is blatantly inscribed with self-threatening irrationalities, the most notorious of which is the Sykotic drive to war. As Oi Paz confides in his notebook, Oitar’s colonising “mission has arrived at Sykaos a generation too late”:

For in the past generation or two their scientists have fallen upon the secrets of primitive nuclear fission... In several great regions of the planet segments of the species are already preparing ‘wars’ against other segments, and plan to detonate huge nuclear explosions upon the other parties. This will fulfil the logic of the evolution of the species, and will perhaps be the apt terminus of its self-extinction.³¹

His conclusion is unambiguous: before making plantation effective, Oitarians must ensure that nuclear war is averted or, in other words, that Sykotic (or “beastly”, as Oi

³¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Sykaos Papers* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 199

Paz typically refers to Earthly) history does not arrive at its logical terminus. The Oitarian account of this history singles out war as the particular irrationality which best defines the species. “There are”, as Oi Paz explains:

[T]wo large patches of lichens now (or empires) which are called ‘blocks’, since it is their business to block all rational intercourse between fellow-creatures on either side. The means of blocking is called a ‘cold war’. A ‘hot war’ (which is the normal condition) is when each seeks utterly to destroy the other, by killing its citizens, burning its cities, poisoning its crops, & c., according to the most advanced technology available to the species. The citizens of one empire or nation are named as ‘enemies’ by another, which signifies a general licence to kill them without further pretext. But in a cold war this licence is temporarily suspended. This is an interval in which both empires or blocks advance all possible preparations to attain superiority for the next hot war, and meanwhile by fraud and insult seek to weaken and intimidate the other, and stir up within them ‘civil wars’ or insurrections.³²

The underpinning “block” from which the logic of Blocs stems is the Sykaans’ “beastly” irreducibility to the Rule of the Wheel – an intrinsic refusal to embrace a notion of order and harmony. This lack of principle which fundamentally distinguishes Sykotic “mortals” from Oitarian humans is nevertheless compensated for by a surrogate devotion to the Rule of Property – and its messenger, Money:

Be it known that the entire society of Sykaans is controlled within a code whose name is ‘property’. Property is a no-thing. Property cannot be touched or smelled or weighed. Nor is property an invisible element or pulse

³² Thompson, *ibid.*, 221

as radio or vibal transfer. It is invisible and it has no physical composition.

Yet property governs all their intercourse from birth to dead-line, and, were property to be removed, no one would know how to come or how to go.³³

Oi Paz's sense of programme permanently clashes with the arbitrary logic of Earthly "freewheel" and egoic projection. Oitar's radical alterity also comes to embody a paradoxical double-bind exposing both shortcomings and possibilities in human history. If Oitar's alienness to the concept of freedom is palpable, what is the effect of a semi-acculturated Oitarian pointing up the hidden programmatic instincts of late capitalist society? How is the human concept of freedom itself to stand the test of defamiliarisation through non-human (that is, non-Sykotic) analysis and description? As Oi Paz observes, in one his most incisive moments:

On Oitar there is ordering of all. It is clear. Each programme-change is in the daily print-out. A space is left for each freewheel. You mortals live without the Rule, in promiscuous disorder, without assigned times or designated days. Yet on Earth there is programming also. But the programmers are hidden and the programmes are secret. Your lives are a great play in which you pretend there are none... On Earth the great programme is Property and Money.³⁴

Helena concedes that, indeed, a "culture *can* be seen as a programme", yet she remains stubbornly firm, even as she witnesses the fatal self-destruction of her species, in her belief that there "has never been a programmer, only a flux of wills and egos, bonds and choices. There is still time for us to choose."³⁵

³³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 92

³⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 360

³⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 361, 378

For Helena, the “light of freedom” (in Winstanley’s revolutionary formulation) shines amid the landscapes of dehumanisation harboured by Oitar and Earth as an evanescent, yet unrelinquished, horizon of human possibility. In spite of growing difficulties, humankind remains under the inward rule of bonding (the antinomian “Gospel of Love”) and in resistant defiance of external imposition. Out of the dire predicament of nuclear war and alien invasion, only regenerate humanity can spring forward with a testimony of essential continuity. Helena and Oi Paz’s son, the aptly named Adam, are the emblematic representatives of a hopeful subversion against the destructive alliance of “exterminism”. The seed of this intergalactic union symbolises the awaited Second Coming of radical Protestantism: Christ, as the antinomians claimed, “risen within” as an immanent rebirth of Man.

The close thematic and moral affinity between *The Sykaos Papers* and *Witness Against the Beast* is evident in the novel’s conclusion. Unable to agree on a common defence strategy against Oitar’s invasion, Earth destroys itself in a nuclear Holocaust leaving Helena a captive in the Oitarian colony on the moon. Her final resolve is outspoken in its assertion of human freedom, a determined gesture of antinomian rebellion against both the programme of actually existing human ideologies and the Moral Law of a “cured” world deprived of choice and the liberty to err. Thus, as the last centralised instruction concerning her person comes along (the Oitarian executive order to “discard” her and bring her to a “dead-line”), she opts out, taking her own life. Helena’s last will is an unabashed declaration of antinomian principle:

I go out, leaving Curses upon Power and Abstract Enmities and Public Lies.

I go out through the gate of my flesh, carrying with me, like a basket of flowers, my memories of love and of friendships and natural joys

Accepting the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Sorry that the Good lost out (it was a near thing)

RENOUNCING MY CONSCIOUSNESS NOT AT ALL

REFUSING THE LEAST TRIBUTE TO THE RULE OF NIHIL

I leave my life of my own free will³⁶

The novel concludes on yet a further note of oppositionality, with the subversion of Helena's half-human son in early adulthood. Adam/Ho Mo (that is, Adam/Homo, Man, the first man) takes upon himself the duty of post-human totalisation, of summing up the fate of his mother's lineage and of projecting a vision of hopeful (if unclear) continuity. As he "declaims" to a stunned audience of programmed Oitarians:

"I have read these mortal sayings among my hostess, or mother's, papers:

"Reason, or the ratio of all we have already known, is not the same that it shall be when we know more. The same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels." Do you wish to exist as crystals performing your patterns before an audience of ice? Our ratios must always be in flux. We must search always for the perfect ratio: but even as we reach out to grasp it, we have become changed through searching, and the ratio is no longer ours but it has become our own alienation, and we must begin the search again. My species destroyed itself in the search, but they might have reached out to new ratios far beyond your circinate programmes. They failed because they became too much like you.

³⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 460

They fell into your binary logic-paths and feedback-loops. They feared their identity, and hung themselves round with the dead.³⁷

The radical emancipatory thesis of this final insurrectionary move places Ho Mo in a clear line of descent from a “conscious” if theoretically piecemeal and essentially “empirical” tradition originating with seventeenth-century revolutionary theology, and reaching through the “humanist” conjunctures of Mugglestonianism, popular Jacobinism, Luddism, Owenism, Morrisian Socialism and ultimately, in Thompson’s own lifetime, the anti-ideological continuities of “1956” and its heritage of struggle and anti-authoritarian virtue for the latter contexts of the century.

Thompson’s abundant elaboration of these humanist points in his later work attests to a growing confluence and unwitting rapprochement with some characteristic positions in Orwell. The brutal world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is significantly apposite to the stratified and impersonal dynamics of Oitar (with obvious parallels: Big Brother/Gracious Goodnesses, proles/butlers etc.), and its “post-totalitarian” landscape of permanent war among blocs is a prefiguration of the Sykotic escalation in an imagined post-Reagan/Gorbachev decade. These obvious similarities in the fiction are equally extended – as hostile Orwellian critics have noted – to the trenchant anti-theoreticism of their respective Socialisms.³⁸ And yet, the apparent alliance of ideas which a comparative reading of Thompson and Orwell may well suggest, is ultimately cancelled out by the retrospective animosity which Thompson distilled apropos of the Orwellian rhetoric of disillusion (as he reads it) and its allegedly foundational

³⁷ Thompson, *ibid.*, 476-477

³⁸ As Christopher Norris has argued, “It is not hard to imagine how Orwell might have reacted, had he lived to witness this phenomenon of a Marxism which repudiates every last vestige of ‘humanist’ sentiment. And indeed, in E.P. Thompson’s ‘The Poverty of Theory’, we have what often reads like a latter-day Orwellian riposte, albeit on a level of argument more intricate and sustained than anything in Orwell.”, “Language, Truth and Ideology: Orwell and the Post-War Left” in Christopher Norris (ed.), *Inside the Myth. Orwell: Views from the Left* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), 247

contribution to what he terms the “Natopolitan” culture of the Cold War West.

Thompson consigned his repudiation of Orwell to a single essay published in 1960, “Outside the Whale”. He chastised the writer for allegedly feeding his temperamental refusals into the nascent machinery of cynicism which began to gather momentum after the setbacks of the Thirties. In this perspective of withdrawal, writes Thompson:

Disenchantment ceases to be a recoil of the responsible in the face of difficult social experience; it becomes an abdication of intellectual responsibility in the face of all social experience. And, in the context of the Cold War, and of exhausted imperialism, the withdrawal or despair of the disenchanted was twisted – often by lesser men – into an apologia for complicity with reaction.³⁹

Thompson concedes that “this pessimism was [not] without adequate *cause*. *Homage to Catalonia* gives a part of the background; the collapse of the Popular Front gives the rest.”⁴⁰ However, Orwell’s assumption that Communism was “a Bad Thing, driven forward by the mainspring of its own bad will”, suppresses all recognition of the particular contexts (especially the rise of Fascism) and essential contents of 1930s radicalism – including an irreducible commitment to humanism itself in the way in which Thompson understands it:

Orwell was blind to all such discriminations; and in this he anticipated the wholesale rejection of Communism which became a central feature of Natopolitan ideology. And this failure was important, not only because it helped to blind a later generation to the forces within Communism making

³⁹ E.P. Thompson, “Outside the Whale” in E.P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy* (London: New Left Books/Stevens and Sons Limited, 1960), 146

⁴⁰ Thompson, *ibid.*, 159

for its transformation, but because it denied the possibility of *hope* within the pattern of social change whenever Communist influence could be detected. This denial of *hope* had the force of an irrational taboo... In this case the taboo contaminated all confidence in social man and imprisoned Orwell in the negations of *1984*.⁴¹

In this critical assessment, Thompson himself remains blind to the more nuanced intricacies of Orwell's politics as we have tried to unravel them. As James Hinton, and David Goodway after him have suggested, it was Thompson's "sentimental loyalty to pre-1956 Communism" which to a great extent blocked the way to a fruitful recognition of political affinity.⁴² The antinomianism which flourishes, as a latter-day call to action, in his book on Blake is temperamentally coordinate with the utopian egalitarianism informing the Orwellian corpus, with varying degrees of intensity but a steady consistency – from his reflections upon the Spanish militia to the still irrepressible insinuation of hope in the physical continuity of Oceania's "proles".

Humanism in Thompson's oeuvre acquires the symbolic efficiency of a utopian call to action, immune and resistant to the reifications and devastations of a "fallen" history and therefore hopeful – through the unremitting experience of oppositionality – for humankind's native languages and resources of redemption. The logic of equality espoused by Orwell, as well as the antinomian faith in human agency championed by Thompson, find their necessary echo and strategic complement in Raymond Williams' crucial revision of the concepts of culture and community, which, as we will see, represents a fundamental triangulation and practico-theoretical climax of this "anti-ideological" tradition of British Socialist thinking.

⁴¹ Thompson, *ibid.*, 163

⁴² Goodway, *ibid.*, 285

PART THREE

RAYMOND WILLIAMS: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

1. An Ordinary Process: the Politics of Culture

The publication of *Culture and Society* in 1958 has been customarily seen as one of the milestones of the Copernican Revolution brought about by Cultural Studies – together with Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* and Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* – as well as a fundamental development in the intellectual history of the post-war British left.¹ Fred Inglis has described it as:

[An] astonishing hybrid of a book mingl[ing] expository primer, practical-critical study of practical critics, anti-English polemic of the discipline of English, and a ponderous but moving political prose poem. It was a life-changer for youngish readers in 1960 or so (including me). Its large, never-quite-grasped purpose was to find and recharge the lost veins of English romantic socialism, to make them glow again in the body politic. And it was to tear away the appropriation made by some thinkers of a history they turned to a reactionary cause not even their own.²

The book’s primary and initial aim, however, was to chart the difficult discursive space governed by the term “culture” as a specific repository of critical and oppositional values and stances generated in response to the emergence of industrial capitalism and its peculiar set of social relations.

¹ See, for example, Dennis L. Dworkin, “Cultural Studies and the Crisis in British Radical Thought”, in Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman (eds.) *Views Beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993)

² Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1998), 146

According to the initial analysis rehearsed by Williams in his 1953 article “The Idea of Culture”, the term had been first identified with “the intellectual side of civilization”, that is, with the complex of abstract thinking functions of a given society (including philosophy, religion, science etc.), and only in a secondary, narrower sense, with “the general body of the arts”. A third meaning of “culture” was later developed which problematised, according to Williams, the stabilising tendencies associated with the two prevalent definitions: “[f]or culture is used in sociology and social anthropology in the sense of ‘a whole way of life’, and the impact of these studies upon general thinking has led to similar uses in history and in criticism.”³ Williams went on to observe that this wide-ranging inflection of the concept was concomitant with a solid English tradition of criticism: the attempt to reconnect apparently discrete functions and expressions of a social totality remained central to the intellectual project of – to cite Williams’ preliminary list – Ruskin, Arnold, Eliot, Read and Leavis: “[t]his extension of a critic’s activities in the judgement of works of art to the study and thence the judgement of “a whole way of life”, had been a marked element of the English tradition.”⁴

A further development, singularly grounded in the ideological specificities of the mid-nineteenth century, came to rehearse a powerful identification of “culture” with a certain standard of “perfection” – thereby stabilising as a moral absolute what had hitherto pulsed as a process or motion of amelioration (in authors such as More, Hobbes or Johnson):⁵ “[t]he word which had indicated a process of training within a more assured society became in the nineteenth century the focus of a deeply significant

³ Raymond Williams, “The Idea of Culture”, in John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (eds.), *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education* (London: NIACE, 1993 [1953]), 57

⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 58

⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 59

response to a society in the throes of a radical and painful change.”⁶ Williams locates the original semantic fixation of the term “culture” as an abstract condition with a moral content in the pages of Coleridge’s *On the Constitution of Church and State*. In this context, “cultivation” – which later uses and idioms would give as “culture” proper – is offered as a guarantee against “corruption”, a standard of “health” against the combined aggression of Liberalism qua new “habit of mind” and Industrialism “in its sense of the reshaping of values consequent upon economic and social change.”⁷

The rising tide of Benthamite Utilitarianism stands out in this ideological horizon as a synthesis of the corrupting trends against which “cultivation”/“culture” was called upon to direct its principled resistance. In the face of a base “materialism”, “the amassing of fortunes and the proposition of utility as the source of value”,⁸ this “standard of perfection” was offered as a superior moral order, a reassertion of pre-existing traditions and values against the structural and ideological solvents of the new economy and its associated social forms.

The adumbration of the modern sense of culture, which, in Williams’ historical reconstruction is associated with a specific nineteenth-century development, was fundamentally concerned with the new available modes of sociality. In that sense, culture was not merely expressive of a topical engagement with Industrialism and its immediate, psychosocial, by-products, but was in many ways a radical response to the “new political and social developments, to *Democracy*.”⁹

Williams acknowledges a further strand of signification in culture, which he comes to privilege and raise above the level of multiple competing or coexisting

⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 60

⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 63

⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 64

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961 [1958]), 17

meanings, and towards which the bulk of his inquiry in *Culture and Society* inevitably draws. This is the sense which identifies culture, beyond the reductive or specialist parcellations of intellectual or artistic commitment, with a “whole way of life”. A plea for the integral repositioning of culture in the service of a democratic vision, of a politically significant programme of social transformation, is garnered from this genealogy of critical thinkers, surfacing in the programmatic conclusion to the book as a topical and vocal call to action.¹⁰

Williams’ survey of the “culture and society” tradition opens with the figures of Edmund Burke and William Cobbett, respectively branded as “the first modern Conservative” and “the first great tribune of the industrial proletariat”.¹¹ Despite their politically divergent trajectories, and the consolidated antagonism of the intellectual traditions to which they gave rise, Burke and Cobbett “attacked the new England from their experience of the old England, and, from their work, traditions of criticism of the new democracy and the new industrialism were powerfully begun: traditions which in the middle of the twentieth century are still active and important.”¹²

Edmund Burke laid the foundations of a characteristic nineteenth-century strategy of resistance and opposition to the societal model propounded by the liberal paradigm. His anti-democratic polemic, waged in particular against the emergent governmental forms of the French Revolution, suggests a radical indictment of the new bourgeois subjectivity and its associated political and social mannerisms. The rise of individual

¹⁰ In his commentary on Williams’s *Culture and Society*, Jan Gorak has pointed out that “[i]n a move of great audacity, Williams recaptures tradition, a territory Eliot used to declare war on the present, and makes it the means of access to an egalitarian future.” Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), 52. In a related emphasis, Dennis Dworkin has written that “[f]or Williams, the “culture and society” tradition represented a critical opposition to classical liberalism, an effort to overcome the centrifugal forces unleashed by bourgeois society.” Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 88

¹¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 23

¹² Williams, *ibid.*, 24

man, as deprived of the “natural” checks imposed by the historical community, of its trans-individual wisdom and traditional security, threatens to dissolve the very bonds and continuities which vouchsafe political freedom.¹³

Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*... Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.¹⁴

Only by securing a superior instance of control and restraint – as Burke says “*out of themselves*; and not... subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue” – can man rise from the state of dependency and debasement of which contemporary political events were but a characteristic expression. Burke’s critical dissection of the revolutionary process in France emanates, according to Williams, from the “relative stability” of the eighteenth century, offering an urgent redeployment of traditional political language, but also an acutely perceptive reaction to “those rising doctrines which the eighteenth-century had produced, and which were to become the characteristic philosophy of the change itself.”¹⁵ Thus, the Burkean critique provided, in a well-nigh proleptic gesture, the basic elements of an ideological formulation which, throughout the ensuing century and well into the next, would make

¹³ For a related analysis, see David E. Musselwhite, “Reflections on Burke’s *Reflections*”, in Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova (eds.), *The Enlightenment and Its Shadows* (London: Routledge, 1990)

¹⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 28

¹⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 30

of liberalism and industrialism two privileged targets in its general assessment of contemporary – modern – society.

Williams' juxtaposition of Burke and Cobbett at the opening of *Culture and Society* functions as both a methodological and programmatic caveat outlining the working argument of the book, namely that "we can only understand this tradition of criticism of the new industrial society if we recognize that it is compounded of very different and at times even directly contradictory elements."¹⁶ This strategic alliance of nominally opposing figures is also rehearsed in the binomial formed by Robert Owen and Robert Southey – the former representing one of the foundational moments of British Socialism and the latter, a new mode of Conservatism in line with Burkean and Coleridgean teaching.

The writings of Thomas Carlyle represent a vital moment in the development of this critical lineage, as it reveals an early yet profound understanding of the enduring changes which industrial capitalism would naturalise, in the course of the century, as a basic appurtenance of modern British society. Carlyle's diagnostic characterisation of the general process focuses on the "mechanical" quality of the age (which he terms the "Age of Machinery") as expressed and embodied in the new methods of production and, by extension or structural contagion, in the wider sphere of thought and feeling. The pragmatic eviction of the artisanal mode in favour of some "cunning abbreviated process" set the standard and the new operative logic of social functioning. A novel concern with productive efficiency, with the technical control of natural forces and generally, with the "external" or "outward" extension of combined human powers, was produced as further proof of the radical reconfiguration which both the physical and metaphysical realms of man had undergone:

¹⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 38

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its pre-established apparatus, it is not done by hand, but by machinery. Thus we have machines for Education: Lancastrian machines; Hamiltonian machines; monitors, maps and emblems. Instruction, that mysterious communing of Wisdom with Ignorance, is no longer an indefinable tentative process, requiring a study of individual aptitudes, and a perpetual variation of means and methods, to attain the same end; but a secure, universal, straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism, with such intellect as comes to hand.¹⁷

Mechanisation could be observed at a multitude of social levels and planes of interaction as a definitive evisceration of the organic links which had traditionally – in the language of Burke – held society together. As Williams points out, Carlyle “sees, with a terrible clarity, the spiritual emptiness of the characteristic social relationships of his day”.¹⁸ With “Cash Payment” acting “as the sole nexus” between one person and the next, the once pristine realm of spiritual life and individual endeavour was fatefully deserted for an impersonal – that is, mechanical – system of collective being and exchange. Thus, “[n]ot for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, – for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle.”¹⁹ This general critique of the social and moral offshoots of industrialisation, which according to Williams, characterises Carlyle as “without

¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”, in Alan Shelston (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 65

¹⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 89

¹⁹ Carlyle, *ibid.*, 67

argument, a radical and a reformer”, also provides a firm intellectual basis from which subsequent appeals to “culture” qua oppositional reservoir of superior value and insurance against the depredations of “mechanism”, will be articulated (in Arnold, most notably).²⁰

In Carlyle’s view, what the *laissez-faire* doctrine had been promoting through the age of the great upheavals – the eighteenth century –, ²¹ the present moment saw transformed and adapted as a fresh rash of vicious political responses stemming from the same root of spiritual devastation. “These Chartisms, Radicalisms, Reform Bill, Tithe Bill, and infinite other discrepancy” rehearse a native version of the French Revolution whilst announcing a set of deeply entrenched forces in society for which execrable political violence is but one natural corollary:²²

Carlyle sees democracy, in fact, as in one sense an expression of the same *laissez-faire* spirit: a cancelling of order and government, under which men can be left free to follow their own interests. Any such criticism of democracy, read now, is only too likely to meet immediate prejudice... Yet the criticism has a certain justice, and is, indeed, a most relevant criticism of that kind of democracy which, for example, reached its climax in the Reform Bill of 1832. Whenever democracy is considered as solely a political arrangement, it is open to Carlyle’s charge. A large part of the spirit of democracy in our kind of society is in fact the spirit of *laissez-faire*,

²⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 86

²¹ A doctrine which sought, as Carlyle observes with impatience, “still to prolong itself in the Nineteenth – which, however, is no longer the time for it!”, Williams, *ibid.*, 94

²² Quoted in Williams, *ibid.*, 92

extended to new interests and creating in consequence new kinds of problem.²³

In this key interpretative gesture, Williams reveals the precise political significance of an intellectual tradition placed at the heart of social change, yet sufficiently distanced from the ideological milieu of the emergent forms – through an often conservative or openly reactionary stance – to bring about a salutary “estrangement effect” and expose the nascent contradictions within the liberal edifice. Carlyle’s political outsidership marks a strategic position from which the critical exposure and indictment of the new social and relational standards of industrial capitalism (as “dictated by the ‘laws’ of political economy”) are enabled. The traditionalist sources of his conception of society, of government, order and value, facilitate the construction of a compelling catalogue (according to Williams, the first of modern significance) of the moral and physical fragmentations characteristic of the new, industrial society. “The idea of culture as the whole way of living of a people” acquires a contextual pregnancy and a radical political expressivity in the face of a hegemonic mode of sociability governed by the “cash nexus” and its attendant rationale.

In this context also, “the idea of culture as the body of arts and learning, and the idea of culture as a body of values superior to the ordinary progress of society” gather a specific relevancy in the elitist Carlylean conception of a “spiritual aristocracy” – a body of sages not dissimilar from Coleridge’s “clerisy” – which would preside over and secure society’s horizon of attainment qua integrated and organic venture. The basic point of contention:

²³ Williams, *ibid.*, 92

[W]ith Carlyle as with Coleridge, and as with Matthew Arnold after them, is that the then existing organization of society, as they understood it, offered no actual basis for the maintenance of such a class. The *separation* of the activities grouped as ‘culture’ from the main purposes of the new kind of society was the ground of complaint.”²⁴

The vexed recognition of a process of fragmentation or separation within nineteenth-century society supplied one of the standard arguments against the “spirit of rapacious covetousness” underpinning the liberal idea of progress. As Benjamin Disraeli put it in *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, in a diagnostic observation which would enduringly resonate throughout the century and beyond: “[t]here is no community in England; there is aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating than a uniting principle... It is a community of purpose that constitutes society ... without that, men may be drawn into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated.”²⁵ Against this fundamental devastation at the core of the social body, culture would come to signify a necessarily militant position and a radical performative instance from which reconstruction – that is, the rearticulation of society’s atomised provinces – may be undertaken, and a future in common, effectively imagined.

With the publication of Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, the standard of “perfection” raised by authors such as J.H. Newman as a salutary counter to the Utilitarian aims of Victorian education finally attained a terminological fixation, as Williams says, “giv[ing] the tradition a single watchword and a name”.²⁶ Arnoldian “Culture” is thus in a direct line of descent from Burkean sentiment and Coleridgean “Cultivation” and “health”, prescribing through the study and acquisition of knowledge

²⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 97

²⁵ Quoted in Williams, *ibid.*, 109

²⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 124

– of “the best which has been thought and said in the world” – a horizon of attainment which would involve “all sides of our humanity”.²⁷ Culture in this particular inflection is, as Williams insists, a fundamentally *general* as opposed to partial or specialised, process of development. The historical experience of hegemonic nineteenth-century liberalism gave Arnold a penetrating critical edge to his conception of “general perfection” through culture. Readily evoking the language and colour of Burke’s analysis, Arnold applied the tag of “Jacobinism” to the abstract imagination of social blueprints in a mechanical programming of the soul: “[v]iolent indignation with the past, abstract systems of renovation applied wholesale, a new doctrine drawn up in black and white for elaborating down to the very smallest details a rational society for the future – these are the ways of Jacobinism.”²⁸

Against this impervious and debased rule of abstraction erected upon the intellectual heritage of the eighteenth century (as Carlyle had observed, a heritage no longer valid for the nineteenth), Arnold would invoke a guided awakening of the “best self” latent in the community, past the immediate obfuscation and pettiness of the existing social classes. The role reserved for the State in this grand design of cultural transmission – as he recommended, through the combined powers of education, poetry and criticism – was paramount. The State, conceptualised as a “centre of authority and light”, was to secure the continuity and survival of a standard of perfection which the current modulation of class interests neglected.²⁹

Opposition to “Jacobinism” in this context signified the principled substitution of moral orientation as against the “external”, disembodied, *dirigisme* of an “abstract” intellectual machine. The insurmountable historical obstacle for Arnold was, however,

²⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 130

²⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 128

²⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 131

that the “State which for Burke was an actuality” – that is, the organic totality which sustained the cohesive notion of society underpinning his critique of the French Revolution – had “become for Arnold an idea” deprived of real, experiential validation.³⁰ To the threat of abstraction (of “Jacobin” blueprints and social “machinery”) was added the fresh ideological fear of an emergent class (the proletariat) equipped with idiosyncratic grievances and a peculiar vision of social re-ordering: the symptom-formation of a society which had long departed from the actual experience of Culture/Cultivation in the old Coleridgean sense of an integral relationship. Faced with this real fracture in the social, Arnold’s doctrine of culture, for all its programmatic articulation as a dynamic process of individual and collective amelioration, runs at times the risk of fetishisation: “his emphasis in detail is so much on the importance of knowing, and so little on the importance of doing, that Culture at times seems very like the Dissenters’ Salvation: a thing to secure first, to which all else will then be added.”³¹

The secular, post-traditional basis on which Arnold’s notion of Culture was premised exposes the limitations of this historical conjuncture: “Culture was a process, but he could not find the material of that process, either, with any confidence, in the society of his own day, or, fully, in a recognition of an order that transcended human society. The result seems to be that, more and more, and against his formal intention, the process becomes an abstraction.”³² Bereft of the theological dimension which had anchored Newman’s notion of perfection, and of the direct experience of traditional social bonds which animated the integrated vision of a Burke and – more residually – of a Coleridge, Arnold’s notion of Culture could not elude the contradictory position of

³⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 132

³¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 134

³² Williams, *ibid.*, 135

presenting itself as an abstract blueprint rather than as a harmonious, organic, growth of concrete perfection.

Williams' exploration of the idea of Culture in the nineteenth century reaches a new climax in the socially-inflected art criticism rehearsed by Pugin, Ruskin and Morris. Ruskin's aesthetic ideas are characterised as also tributary to the general conception of society in this tradition. The artistic process and the notion of artistic value in particular are here predicated on a sense of "wholeness" which is directly accountable for the quality of the art being produced and generally, for the quality of the society in which it is produced. In a civilisation mediated by the "external" workings of industrialism and the "mechanical" regulations of the market, "Beauty" – in particular, the universal evidence of "Divine attributes" which he terms "Typical Beauty" and makes applicable to proper aesthetic judgement – is fatefully impaired and disabled. The hegemonic spirit of *laissez faire*, with its fundamental dissolution of stable social relationships and its surrender of value to the extrinsic law of exchange, made the expressive dynamic of a whole way of life (as variously conceived of under the sign of art, social design or cultural ideal) increasingly elusive and immaterial. Thus, for Williams, the historical conjuncture shared by these nineteenth-century thinkers is characterised by temporal dislocation and an antiquarian instinct awaiting its proper transformation into revolutionary zeal:

Burke was perhaps the last serious thinker who could find the 'organic' in an existing society. As the new industrial society established itself, critics like Carlyle and Ruskin could find the 'organic' image only in a backward look: this is the basis for their 'medievalism', and of that of others. It was

not, in this tradition, until Morris that this image acquired a distinctly future reference – the image of socialism.³³

Williams' concluding chapter in *Culture and Society* attempts both an analytical recapitulation of the historical meanings attached to the word culture, the diverse and evolving conjunctures under which it was tentatively pressed into service through the rise and consolidation of industrialism, as well as a programmatic call for a redeployment of its integral sense as a collective experience and ideal. The political horizon into which the idea of culture is here inserted takes the notion of community as its operative social principle and that of democracy as the crucial historical dynamic to which it variously seeks to respond. Williams' concern with the strengthening discourse of "mass civilisation", "mass democracy" and "mass communication" announces the terms of his engagement with the contemporary valuation, in late industrial Britain, of democracy itself.

In Williams' view, the blanket indictment of mass society and its by-products, including, fundamentally, its direct political manifestation as "mass" democracy, often conceals a prejudiced condemnation of majority rule. The key resides, now as before, in the ideologically loaded notion of "the masses", which genealogically links – in a characteristic gesture of closure common to numerous conservative thinkers in the studied tradition – the evolution of a new collective subject to a general law of social degeneration: "with universal suffrage, majority rule will, if we believe in the existence of the masses, be mass-rule. Further, if the masses are, essentially, the mob, democracy

³³ Williams, *ibid.*, 146

will be mob-rule. This will hardly be good government, or a good society; it will, rather, be the rule of lowness or mediocrity.”³⁴

The new collective subject in question, during the historical period which commences with the first social symptoms of the Industrial Revolution is, unmistakably for Williams, the working class. Consequently, the reticent reference to the masses betrays, whenever pressed for its ultimate consequences, a rejection, not so much of a degraded incarnation of democracy but, rather, of democracy as such, understood as the possibility of social transformation through full political participation.³⁵ The fundamental contention here is resonant with Priestley’s “populist” argument in *Out of the People*:

The people are not the masses. These are two different conceptions. Indeed, they are opposed. One rejects the other. When I say to myself “the people,” I have a confused but lively vision of a hundred faces and a hundred voices, as if a picture by old Breughel had suddenly come to life. In short, I think of persons. But when I say to myself “the masses,” I see at once a grey featureless horde, and hear nothing but a muttering and murmuring... We never belong to the masses. We are always distinct, separate and fairly far removed. Once any person has for us achieved a name, a face, a voice, a real individuality, then he or she is no longer merely one of the masses.³⁶

In a similar vein, Williams asserts:

I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses... The masses are always the others, whom we

³⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 288

³⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 288

³⁶ J.B. Priestley, *Out of the People* (London: Collins, 1941), 18

don't know, and can't know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see these others regularly, in their myriad variations; stand, physically, beside them. They are here, and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point. To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people.³⁷

The known predicament of advanced industrialism (as prophetically intuited by critics in the aforementioned tradition) revolves around this paradox: togetherness, that is, physical community is overlaid with the proper distortions and fractures of interpersonal estrangement. And this shared alienation which pulsates in the notion and in the contemporary experience of the masses is both the limit and the condition for any future realisation of the democratic promise.

The notion of "mass communication" therefore exposes the inherent contradiction of advanced industrial society. Since "any real theory of communication" is ultimately premised on a theory of community, the "techniques of mass-communication will be irrelevant... to the degree that we judge them to be conditioned, not by a community, but by the lack or incompleteness of a community".³⁸ The organisational principle which supports this particular society fosters a conception of communication which is exclusively identifiable as domination. This principle is, in Williams' analysis, an "inequality of being" which brands society in the totality of its relations, and which the new media rely upon in their disconnected chain of transmission, thereby maintaining an essential uncommunity whose instinctual response is often political "inertia and apathy". For Williams, the urgent political task for a committed culture to undertake is precisely to contain the flood of this rising inequality. The restitution of genuine

³⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 289. For a critical reading of this passage, see Patrick Parrinder, *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), 65-66

³⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 301

communication demands the provision of “an effective community of experience”, a sense of participation, “active reception, and living response” beyond the customary fracture of existing social relations.³⁹

In this respect, Williams’ militant call for equality undergoes a fundamental qualification which places his bid in direct conversation with the charted tradition. Equality is not to be interpreted or pursued as a substantive levelling or qualitative smoothing over of existing differences in a community – in a culture – but avowedly, as a living assertion of “the fundamental equality of being”.⁴⁰ In this particular respect, Williams falls back on his optimistic assessment of Lawrence’s writings on equality a few chapters earlier:

One man is neither equal nor unequal to another man. When I stand in the presence of another man, and I am my own pure self, am I aware of the presence of an equal, or of an inferior, or of a superior? I am not. When I stand with another man, who is himself, and when I am truly myself, then I am only aware of a Presence, and of the strange reality of Otherness... There is no comparing or estimating. There is only this strange recognition of *present otherness*... Comparison enters only when one of us departs from his own integral being, and enters the material mechanical world. Then equality and inequality starts at once.⁴¹

From this idiosyncratic logic of equality (Williams writes “[t]his seems to me to be the best thing that has been written about equality in our period”), Williams’ 1950s Socialism derives a commitment to the ethical conditions under which a post-mechanical freedom – that is, the sort of freedom on which full, uninhibited or

³⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 304

⁴⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 305

⁴¹ Quoted in Williams, *ibid.*, 209-210

undistorted democracy is predicated – may be conceived. Again, a Lawrentian definition, to which Williams is clearly sympathetic, may be in order: “[m]en are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose.”⁴² Thus, a community of experience of the sort which enables real communication is the absolute condition for freedom itself, and consequently, for any lived and effective understanding of democracy beyond the ritual application of a dominative and impersonal logic of government.

This community of experience requires an assertion of the basic equality of being which, as Williams insists, does not imply any disregard for the fruitful “inequalities” (or differences, by another name) which a complex community of culture necessarily involves. The hierarchical (or “dominative”) schema of transmission is, on the other hand, radically incompatible with actual communication and the living realities of a common culture. In a clear departure from the elitist assumptions of the tradition (whether in their Arnoldian-liberal or Fabian-socialist versions), the conclusion is reached that “[n]obody can raise anybody else’s cultural standard. The most that can be done is to transmit the skills, which are not personal but general human property, and at the same time to give open access to all that has been made and done.”⁴³

This argument generates, in Williams’ early articulation of culture, an axiomatic principle which will subsequently coordinate the discrete elements of the charted tradition into an operative conceptualisation: namely, the crucial idea that “culture is ordinary”.⁴⁴ This, again, presupposes a fundamental derivation of concepts and formulations from processed – yet all the same, immediately lived, directly accessible – experience. In moving along the pathway of biographical reference, and in extracting a

⁴² Williams, *ibid.*, 210

⁴³ Williams, *ibid.*, 306

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary”, in John McIlroy and Sally Westwood (eds.), *ibid.*

rationale with political consequences from this experiential hub, the “vision of a free homeland” punctuated by Lawrence as a paradoxical, yet highly symptomatic elaboration of the communitarian response to social change, acquires a fresh relevancy to the democratic project of “culture”.⁴⁵ Thus, the “close quick relationship” which both Lawrence and Williams acknowledge – in their different ways – as an unsung asset of working-class life, provides a functional key to the holistic interpretation of the idea of culture as pursued and developed in the tradition. As the argument goes, the “making” and “finding” of “common meanings and values” gives sustenance to the primary mode of expression of culture in any given society. It is precisely the “commonality” and the “ordinariness” (that is, the spontaneous, trans-individual or collective, and processual manner in which such meanings and values are evolved) which first constitutes the material setting for the ulterior, derived and specialised, sense of the term culture as creative, individual endeavour:

The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment, under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings.⁴⁶

The collective tenor of this “active debate and amendment” is alive in the notion that culture is first and foremost, a “whole way of life”. As T.S. Eliot expressed it, in a

⁴⁵ Fred Inglis, *ibid.*, 147

⁴⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 90

formulation which, as we have seen, Williams takes up and adapts to his own idiom, culture, not unlike religion, should be regarded as “the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep.”⁴⁷

This unconscious dimension suggested by Eliot is central to the real genesis of “common meanings and directions” in the making of a society. Thus the conscious crafting of new meanings must necessarily coexist with the experiential immediacy of a global process, with the unconscious aspects of a culture which inevitably pulsate within it. As Williams in turn observes: “[n]o community, no culture, can ever be fully conscious of itself, ever fully know itself. The growth of consciousness is usually uneven, individual, and tentative in nature.”⁴⁸ In a context of increasing social specialisation or complexification, the task of bringing a “genuinely common culture” into existence is only realisable under conditions of “material community and by the full democratic process”.⁴⁹ However obscure and tentative, this recommendation is fully consonant with a communal vision of the kind articulated by Lawrence. The “close quick relationship” of the proletarian household, the undivided nature of a collective mode of existence in which the “material processes of satisfying human needs are not separated from personal relationships”,⁵⁰ provides the model and the strategic horizon for the shift which must occur from defensive to active solidarity in the culture:

To any individual, however gifted, full participation will be impossible, for the culture will be too complex. Yet effective participation is certainly possible. It will, at any time, be selective from the whole culture, and there will be difference and unevenness in selection, as there will be in

⁴⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962 [1948]), 31

⁴⁸ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 320

⁴⁹ According to Terry Eagleton “A common culture could never be wholly self-transparent precisely because of the range of active collaboration it engages, not because it betrays the enigmatic mystery of an organism”, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 120

⁵⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 205

contribution. Such selection, such unevenness, can be made compatible with an effective community of culture, but only by genuine mutual responsibility and adjustment. This is the conversion of the defensive element of solidarity into the wider and more positive practice of neighbourhood.⁵¹

Working-class culture cannot be defined in the narrow terms suggested by notions of “proletarian culture”, as a closed set of features or trends:⁵² “it is, rather, the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from this... The culture which it has produced, and which it is important to recognize, is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the cooperative movement, or a political party.”⁵³ Thus, the body of culture organically adumbrated by the working class through its collective experience of industrial capitalism prefigures a historical starting point for the deployment and vindication of a common strategy beyond the hegemonic abstractions of the “bourgeois idea of society”. This alternative to the “idea of society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right” offers a rallying point for the antagonistic representation of culture as a social antidote to atomisation.⁵⁴

For Williams, the negotiation of tensions and possibilities arising from this encounter between a distinguished critical tradition (the “culture and society” tradition)

⁵¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 319-320

⁵² See also Raymond Williams, “Working Class Culture”, *Universities and Left Review* vol. 1 no. 2 (Summer 1957)

⁵³ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 313

⁵⁴ Writing a few years later, in 1968, Williams summarises the aims and purposes of this early theorisation of culture as “an attempt to focus questions about the quality of life available in a particular community, as a way of putting questions to the simple material progress, or the simple social confidence, of the dominant kind of society”, “The Idea of a Common Culture”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 33

and a biographical experience of “close spontaneous living” demanded a repositioning of community as the moral and political basis of any future programme for democratic social transformation. The community, thus theorised, was first and foremost an immediacy of loyalties, a deep consciousness of collective answerability dictated by the relative stability of relations, and by the spatial continuity and permanence of subject positions within the social configuration. This is, unmistakably, the strong sense of community represented by Williams’ own native background in the Welsh borders, in the Black Mountains village of Pandy, and in the broad formative experience which then nourished the concept with a deep sense of mutual recognition and obligation. It is, likewise, the deep organicism which informs his valuation of Lawrence’s relevancy, and which provides, in turn, a measure of their shared ground and biographical parallel.⁵⁵

Williams’ early work is haunted by a looming sense of displacement from the native community – from “close, quick relationship” – and by an enforced compensation through radical politics. Thus, his early years in Cambridge as a “scholarship boy” combined the profound alienness of class discrimination and elitism – in a clear rehearsal of the reductive and discriminatory sense of the term “culture” –⁵⁶ with the politically conscious reproduction of a communal solidarity and identity. As he would later remark to the interviewers of the *New Left Review*, “I had to dine in Hall and the class stamp of Trinity at that time was not difficult to spot. But it did not have to be negotiated as the only context at Cambridge. The Socialist Club was a home from home.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ This shared ground has been articulately explored by Peter Gurney in “ ‘Measuring the Distance’: D.H. Lawrence, Raymond Williams and the Quest for “Community””, in Keith Laybourn (ed.), *Social Conditions, Status and Community 1860-c.1920* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 160-183

⁵⁶ “What other people, in different situations, might experience more directly as economic or political inequality, was naturally experienced, from my own route, as primarily an inequality of culture: an inequality which was also, in an obvious sense, an uncommunity.” Williams, *ibid.*, 32

⁵⁷ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 40

His first fictional/autobiographical intervention, *Border Country*, marks an initial exploration of this personal trajectory as well as an intense mediation of the overarching intellectual concerns addressed in *Culture and Society*. As Stephen Woodhams has noted, “*Border Country* had begun to be written in 1946 as *Brynllwyd*, and represents the most immediate means by which Williams pursued his own passage through these years.”⁵⁸ It seems that the conceptual profile of the reflection, articulated through the personal trinity of “culture”, “community” and “Wales” (“in which “Wales” serves to frame the other two”, according to Dai Smith),⁵⁹ required a strategic move beyond the resilient academicism of the critical essay, and that only the signifying fluidity of the novel form could capture and engage with the experiential complexities of a lived culture in common.

Border Country is a vital instance of reflective self-interrogation – a critical scrutiny of the general historical moment which frames his initial incursion into the field of cultural theory (the “affluent” 1950s), and a penetrating account of the complex negotiation of personal and general loyalties which directly concerned Williams’ generation of “scholarship boys”. The narrative of upward mobility which provides the background to the novel and to Williams’ own trajectory is permanently destabilised, mediated and significantly reconfigured by the prominence of a fundamental notion – that of the border – which informs both the title of the novel and the bulk of Williams’ historical understanding of the term “culture”.

⁵⁸ Stephen Woodhams, *History in the Making: Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson and Radical Intellectuals 1936-1956* (London: The Merlin Press, 2001), 98. Williams produced some seven successive versions of the novel between 1947 and 1960, as he strove to develop a form which would precisely express the sort of transformation in which his personal and social experience was involved. Thus, he sought to disengage it from the available models, which tended to confine the individual and collective dimensions to an enclosed, or cut-off, “zone of experience”: “[t]he early versions of *Border Country* were continuous with these kinds of writing... Then I gradually realized that with the degree of change after 1945 the problem was to find a fictional form that would allow the description both of the internally-seen working-class community and of a movement of people, still feeling their family and political connections, out of it.”, Williams, *ibid.*, 272

⁵⁹ Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 279

The border to which the novel alludes is, in that sense, the ontological condition inhabited by Williams himself and by his fictional alter ego, Matthew Price. It provides the spatial context of a personal dislocation (from rural Wales to metropolitan London); it entails the social dimension of a cross-class transition (from working- to middle-class); it involves a temporal margin or historical separation between the heroic moment of the 1926 General Strike and the “meretricious society” of the Fifties. And most importantly, it balances the permanently unresolved in-betweenness of his moral world (Welsh and English, working- and middle-class, collectivist and atomist).

Border Country is an account of intellectual and material exile from a firm sense of primary, original attachment (from the Lawrentian world of “close, quick relationships”) and a quest for common meanings and values (a quest for “culture” in the broadly encompassing sense of Williams’ theorisation). It is, in other words, a reawakening to “identity” through a renovated experience of community.

Matthew Price’s return to the native community, to the Welsh border village of Glynmawr, as his father falls terminally ill, paves the way for an emotional pilgrimage back to the common sources of selfhood and belonging, revealing, in the process, a complex set of relations and alliances. An economic historian by training, Price’s research deals with “population movements into the Welsh mining valleys in the middle decades of the nineteenth century”.⁶⁰ His own lived experience of a similar movement confronts him with the limitations of measurement – of the means and techniques of measurement required by the scientific approach of his particular discipline and the basically inaccessible – ungraspable, unfixable – essence of the measured object:

⁶⁰ Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006), 4

The techniques I have learned have the solidity and precision of ice-cubes, while a given temperature is maintained. But it is a temperature I can't really maintain; the door of the box keeps flying open. It's hardly a population movement from Glynmawr to London, but it's a change of substance, as it must also have been for them, when they left their villages. And the ways of measuring this are not only outside my discipline. They are somewhere else altogether, that I can feel but not handle, touch but not grasp.⁶¹

Only the immanent trajectory of a psychological journey back to the native milieu, only an internal reconstruction of the experience of displacement, loss and recovery, can successfully bridge this change of substance. Only, as the novel sets out to exemplify, the holistic interpretation of culture as an integral way of life (as "a whole way of life"), as a total embodiment of meaningful relations and their derivative set of values, can express the vital dimension of social inquiry – while external, forensic, observation only grasps at the surface.

The journey home is a relapse into the rhythms of a foregone past ("Abruptly the rhythm changed, as the wheels crossed the bridge"),⁶² into the realm of an old habitation colliding with the circumstances of personal dislocation. The crossing of the border, signalled in the narration by a change of rhythm which is reflected in the syntax as a shift to longer, parsimonious, sentences, marks the resurrection of an experiential kernel punctuated by distance, nostalgia and, increasingly, the proper combinations of an enabling recognition.⁶³ Along with the peculiar rattle of the carriage, as the

⁶¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 4

⁶² Williams, *ibid.*, 8

⁶³ Laura di Michele, "Autobiography and the 'Structure of Feeling' in *Border Country*", in Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman (eds.), *Views Beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993)

Herefordshire borderlands fade into the Welsh landscape, the temporally removed awareness of belonging is shaped into a present concern, into an immediate compulsion to re-live forgotten connections and repressed ways. This becomes apparent as soon as Matthew sets foot in the local station at Gwenton and, self-engrossed in reverie, fails to recognise the voice of an old family friend, Morgan Rosser, who has come to pick him up:

As he walked down the station approach, a car drove towards him, raking him with its headlights, in which the rain drifted. The driver blew his horn, but Matthew ignored it. He walked on, steadily, turning his face from the wind. So much of his memory of this country was a memory of walking: walking alone, with the wind ripping at him; alone it seemed always, in memory, though not in fact.⁶⁴

In trying to reconstruct this elemental, distant sensation – the core images of his native life – Matthew seems to forget or exclude the determining factor in that ungraspable “substance” which his scientific method cannot properly isolate: the lived experience of community, which was characterised, as Williams had reportedly known it in childhood and adolescence, by “the extending obligations of neighbourhood”.⁶⁵

Williams’ definition of the “country” is fleshed out in this distinctive quality of the minimal bond and the loaded interpersonal space. Matthew’s encounter with Morgan Rosser prompts the re-absorption of his present, alien self (urban, middle-class, intellectual) into the old textures and patterns of behaviour – it compels, without the

⁶⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 9-10

⁶⁵ Raymond Williams, “The Importance of Community”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *ibid.*, 115

intervention of external measurement, a deep, unverbaised understanding of life in common: “[i]t is like this, this country; it takes you over as soon as you set foot in it.”⁶⁶

The encounter with the bed-ridden father makes this resurgent awareness all the more pressing and urgent. Now the formal, contrived, veil upon which much of his acquired, contemporary identity depends is revealed useless in this extraordinary effort to communicate with the past. Matthew gives way to Will, the name under which he had been known throughout childhood, and words, for the most part, give way to postures, to gestures and generally, to the physical immediacy of emphatic silence and muted yet meaningful dialogue:

[H]is whole mind seemed a long dialogue with his father – a dialogue of anxiety and allegiance, of deep separation and deep love. Nothing could stop this dialogue, nothing else seemed important, yet here, with the pale hand laying by his own hand, with the face no longer an image but there, anxiously watched, the command to silence was absolute, while the dialogue raced.⁶⁷

The relative distance of personal circumstance and temporal ascription (the fact that Matthew *belongs* in the 1950s whilst Harry comes across as more of a figuration of a bygone world) is bridged by this elemental community of sensation between dying father and returning son. The loaded temporality of imminence (the tense expectancy of the coming end, of Harry’s death) is overlaid in this passage with an intensity of identification which lays, in a way, the emotional foundations of subsequent instances of community in the novel.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Border Country*, 11

⁶⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 20

The family (interestingly emblematised by the father-son relationship, while the role assigned to the mother is considerably less prominent) supplies a preliminary context for communality – a primordial scenario of shared meanings and obligations which prefigures, and yet is only validated or sanctioned by its extension into the larger social grouping. Thus, for example, the psychologically distant portrait of the paternal grandfather, hanging on the bedroom wall, manages to convey a secret intimation of a primary bond which only becomes meaningful as part of a larger, social, experience:

Here again was complexity. The mediocre photograph had the life of a fine portrait... Jack Price, labourer, very formal in the stiff, high collar and the smooth, unworn lapels and waistcoat. Then the eyes, colourless in the hazy enlargement, but not his son's eyes, clouded, unfocused; eyes still with the devil in them, the spurt of feeling and gaiety. Remembering their living excitement, Matthew stared back feeling their world.⁶⁸

It is the intimation of a whole way of life made available in the visual trajectory – the longing eye meeting the full expression of a past life-world. The weight of the silent dialogue is sustained by the look and the deep understanding of a process which is unexceptional, yet complex, ongoing and thoroughly social.

Matthew Price's journey home is an attempt to unravel the inner significance of this life-world as it has grown removed and foreign from personal experience. And it is fundamentally an attempt to reconnect its outward aspects – its crystallisation in memory and detached analysis as a familiar image, a landscape etc – to the dense, inner life of a living world. The bid to resuscitate the old codes of interaction – the “intrusive” neighbours, the closeness and mutuality of social life – combines with the effort to

⁶⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 21

galvanise old graphic detail – the valley and the mountains of childhood – back into a real, effective presence. Work, that is, the realisation of work as the primary social relationship whereby individual human lives are brought together into a functioning whole, marks the transition to this galvanic activation. It operates as the organising framework (the social context) within which the reconnection can be achieved:

He had felt empty and tired, but the familiar shape of the valley and the mountains held and replaced him. It was one thing to carry its image in his mind, and he did, everywhere, never a day passing but he closed his eyes and saw it again, his only landscape. But it was different to stand and look at the reality. It was not less beautiful; every detail of the land came up with its old excitement. But it was not still, as the image had been. It was no longer a landscape or a view, but a valley that people were using. He realized, as he watched, what had happened in going away. The valley as landscape had been taken, but its work forgotten. The visitor sees beauty; the inhabitant a place where he works and has his friends... This was not anybody's valley to make into a landscape. Work had changed and was still changing it, though the main shape held.⁶⁹

The colour of social interaction – the interpersonal rhythms of the border country – is in itself a constant reminder, for Matthew's exilic consciousness, of that "network" in which native life had been steeped in the beginning.⁷⁰ The emotional reawakening of

⁶⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 91

⁷⁰ According to the critical terms set down by Williams himself, *Border Country* qualifies in this particular respect as a "true industrial novel": "[b]oth the realist and the naturalist novel, more generally, had been predicated on the distinctive assumption... that the lives of individuals, however intensely and personally realized, are not just influenced but in certain crucial ways formed by general social relations. Thus industrial work, and its characteristic places and communities, are not just a new background: a new 'setting' for a story. In the true industrial novel they are seen as formative. Social relations are not assumed, are not static, are not conventions within which the tale of a marriage or an inheritance or an adventure can go its own way. The working society – actual work, actual relations, an actual and visibly

“Will”, by the father’s deathbed, is inextricably bound up with a reawakening, from the torpid social and political standpoint of 1950s metropolitan Britain, to the collective energies of, first, an old country mode and, second, a foregone conjuncture of politically conscious “common life”.

The novel rehearses History as both the general horizon and the natural extension of conflicts, negotiations and victories achieved at the level of small-scale interpersonal alliances. The drama of the 1926 General Strike provides the concrete framework in which these patterns are tested and the specific formulations of community and culture (of the whole way of life), fleshed out. With the novel’s time frame shifting to 1926 and the crucial events of that year, the circumstances of unprecedented co-ordinated class action serve a particular purpose of collective self-definition and identification. The strike is accorded pride of place in the general organisation and ulterior contextualisation of social and individual identities: the bonds and fractures generated by this single, but momentous action constitute the historical and biographical foundation upon which subsequent instances of community and communication (between Matthew and his father, between Matthew and Morgan Rosser, between Rosser and Harry etc) will – implicitly, for the most part – be measured.⁷¹

Thus the idiosyncratic forms of labour and militancy enacted on the structural (and geographical) outskirts of industrial life (whose “centre” would be represented by the mining valleys to the south-west) constitute a symptomatic development of the idea

altered place – is in the industrial novel central: not because, or not necessarily because, the writer is ‘more interested in sociology than in people’ ... but because in these working communities it is a trivial fantasy to suppose that these general and pressing conditions are for long or even at all separable from the immediate and the personal.” Raymond Williams, “The Welsh Industrial Novel”, in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 221-222

⁷¹ As Dai Smith has noted, in its published version, the novel differs in its emphasis on the Strike from the draft version *Border Village*, where “the issues and incidents are brought together, before the General Strike, to show how “the common good” can be attained by working together. We see a community taking on deeper formations *before* the Strike rather than merely as one of its consequences”, Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior’s Tale* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2008), 431

and the practice of community. The experience of the Strike in Glynmawr is mediated by its marginal position in the Black Mountains, and its “border” location between England and Wales, between an old, backward rurality and the forward-looking world of industrialisation. Analogously, Harry Price and Morgan Rosser’s active participation in the Strike is marked by yet another border position within their class affiliation: as signalmen working at the local railway station their identification with the cause of the miners is both external and yet central; it is dialecticised as a formative dynamic of their own social relations in and personal experience of the local community. As Williams noted in a later piece:

[B]y the very fact of the railway, with the trains passing through, from the cities, from the factories, from the ports, from the collieries, and by the fact of the telephone and the telegraph, which was especially important for the signalmen, who through it had a community with other signalmen over a wide social network, talking beyond their work with men they might never actually meet but whom they knew very well through voice and opinion and story, they were part of a modern industrial working class.⁷²

The striking railwaymen, through their particular experience of commitment, solidarity, internal defection and eventual defeat, manage to isolate the dynamic and formative nature of social relations as a dialectical structure with general, external conditions in the public realm and local, particular developments in the personal sphere. A specific discipline of loyalty to their fellow workers, to their union and to their class is exercised in what constitutes the novel’s political and emotional core. From the general “principle” of class solidarity which causes the action (as Harry puts it to Major Blakely “[p]art of the fair price for any man is a fair price for his brother. I wouldn’t want it if

⁷² Raymond Williams, “The Social Significance of 1926”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *ibid.*, 106

the miners went without”)⁷³ to the final, validating consequence derived by the striking men (a concrete experience of “actual” solidarity), a routine of rural, border-country, common life has been strengthened and a new prospect of mutual endeavour has risen from the known textures of common experience: “[t]hey seemed to know instinctively that it was important to be with each other.”⁷⁴

The bitter realities of defeat, betrayal (by the union and the TUC) and victimisation in the wake of the strike contribute a further dimension to this complex arrangement. The most characteristic transformation concerning the social corollary of this experience is perhaps that which affects Morgan Rosser:

The end of the strike had changed Morgan. Harry had lost most, by being off work, but recovered quickly... But for Morgan, really, there was no satisfaction. A struggle had been lost; a common effort had failed. And it was not only the failure that broke him, but the insight this gave, or seemed to give, into the real nature of society. His life had been centred on an idea of common improvement. The strike had raised this to an extraordinary practical vividness. Then, suddenly, a different reality had closed in.⁷⁵

The imperative confirmation of compromise over commitment, as rehearsed in the traumatic form of a major historical disappointment (a calculated betrayal – in the bitter reckoning of the more militant elements of the labour movement – of conceivable, radical, social change), is rationalised through the reorientation of personal purpose. Morgan becomes a vehicle for the essentially dramatic subsumption of a whole world (a whole “structure of feeling”, in a phrase Williams would popularise) within its

⁷³ Williams, *Border Country*, 142

⁷⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 156

⁷⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 189

embodied negation: feelings of political solidarity and collective effort give way to the individual ambitions of small-scale entrepreneurship.

But despite the apparent failure of the common project outlined and heralded by the strike, the nature and scope of the living sociality addressed by the novel lies deeper, in a structure of interpersonal feeling and action which surfaces under external contrast and which underpins the general rationale behind Matthew's adult re-encounter with the community through a "private" re-encounter with the dying father. This deeper structure is captured in the novel by one of those external observers – the vicar, Arthur Pugh – who, early on in Matthew's life, supplies him with a key to the general understanding he will only attain many years later. The actual profile of a "common life" is distinguished beyond the external appearances of customary interaction, in a logic of mutual dependency and undivided existence which underpins every other aspect of observable social life. As Pugh puts it:

'The real life here, Matthew, is the growing and the selling. At least it often seems so, seems no more. But that isn't fair. The real life, for these people, is each other. Even their religion is for each other... The chapels are for people to meet, and to talk to each other or sing together. Around them, as you know, moves almost the whole life of the village. That, really, is their religion... The chapels are social organizations, Matthew. The church here is not. I don't mean that their religious professions are insincere, but they could equally, it seems to me, be professions in almost anything – any other system of belief, for instance. What matters, what holds them together, is

what their members do, through them, for each other. God, you might say, is their formula for being neighbourly.’⁷⁶

The traditions of Welsh Nonconformity are singled out as the native locus of an organisation of feelings and loyalties through which community – qua real, lived experience of moral togetherness – is forged in this context.⁷⁷ And neighbourliness, perhaps the semantic crux of emotional alliances in this novel, is given as the interpersonal formula on which an entire social ontology, as it were, is predicated.⁷⁸

Matthew Price’s removal from this universe of physical and moral continuities involves the traumatic blurring of a native ethic and a vital space in which identity still preserves the organic meaning of an actual way of life. The realisation of psychological distance and personal exile gives the measure of loss, through which ultimate recovery is rendered possible. Thus the climax of the novel is to some extent epiphanical, as the interrupted journey back to London (due to Harry’s second and fatal stroke) presents the adult son with the open profile of his predicament and, paradoxically, with the enabling

⁷⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 278

⁷⁷ As Robert Pope notes, “Nonconformist ecclesiology [was] characterized by a classless *gwerin*, ‘a country’s residents of every grade and class’. The word ‘gwerin’ reflected at best a prohibitive social moralism, one that required its adherents to recognize the fundamental equality of all men under God, and at worst a philosophy of denial.”, Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales, 1906-1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 4. The semantic and ideological continuities between theology and (deep) social organisation are particularly relevant to the problematic addressed by *Border Country*. See also Roberto del Valle Alcalá, “Rising with One’s Community: Socialist Theory and Bildungsroman in Lewis Jones”, *Culture, Language and Representation*, 8 (2009), 141-156

⁷⁸ Williams would later dwell on the established as opposed to the experiential uses of the term “neighbour”. In a famous passage, he recalls a characteristic clash with Professor L.C. Knights at Cambridge: “[h]e said that the word ‘neighbour’ in Shakespeare indicated something that *no* twentieth-century person can understand, because it signified a whole series of obligations and recognitions over and above the mere fact of physical proximity... Well, then I got up, straight from Pandy, so to say, and said I knew perfectly well what ‘neighbour’, in that full sense, means... Now this was not to idealize my own place... I do not mean that people all liked each other. I do not mean that people didn’t play dirty tricks on each other sometimes. I do not mean that people didn’t have disputes. I mean that there was nevertheless a level of social obligation which was conferred by the fact of seeming to live in the same place and in that sense to have a common identity. And from this sense there were acts of kindness beyond calculation, forms of mutual recognition even when they were wild misrepresentations of the world outside.” Williams, “The Importance of Community” in Gable (ed.), *ibid.*, 113-114

condition of his successful homecoming. While waiting on the platform for the outbound train, the communal principle of this forgotten life becomes apparent:

The long platform was crowded, and he moved into one of the few empty spaces. Then he caught what he was doing, and hesitated. It had become a habit, this moving away, a habit no less his own because it was also the habit of his crowded society. The immediate defence prepared itself; that he was country-bred, used to space and aloneness. And this defence was plausible, the need to be alone was real, until the crowded hall, the chapel, the bus, were remembered. He saw how over the years he had been steadily moving away, avoiding contact. The way of thinking which had supported him in this seemed suddenly a dead weight, an immaturity of which he had been conscious since this crisis in his father's life... Closing his eyes, he saw Harry's heavy body, and the crowd moved in it, the crowd in its constant pressure.⁷⁹

The completion of the journey awaits in this climactic realisation, and in the unspoken knowledge of a deep continuity across differences of circumstance, emphasis and manner. The distance presupposes change, evolution and separation, but it also dictates – in the final reckoning – a complex and substantive arrangement whose acceptance alone can end exile and grant the sort of understanding from which external, scientific analysis is excluded: “[n]ot going back, but the feeling of exile ending. For the distance is measured, and that is what matters. By measuring the distance, we come home.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 392-393

⁸⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 436. This peculiar understanding of the emotional exile in *Border Country* has been likened to Williams' own treatment of Lawrence. As Laura di Michele has observed: “[p]erhaps Williams thought of him [Matthew] in terms very similar to those he used to discuss Lawrence's type of exile: it was a necessary exile to gain the necessary distance and consciousness of oneself and of the other

Williams' work is deeply immersed in this peculiar "ethic" of measurement. Some of the critical aspects outlined in his early interventions on the theory of culture were thus to be recombined in a multi-form yet co-ordinated effort whose projected political consequences were, as we have seen, often inseparable from the most personal and reflective formulations.

members of the community, to acquire the necessary sensibility to *feel* and *understand* the close relationships which connect the people of an "organic" community together.", Di Michele, *ibid.*, 28

2. *The Long Revolution*: history, communication and conflict

With the publication of *The Long Revolution* in 1961 Williams felt to “have completed a body of work” spanning *Culture and Society* and *Border Country* which had commenced with his initial interrogation of the “idea of culture” in the early 1950s. According to certain commentators, the later book attempted to counteract some of the lingering theoretical confusions harboured by *Culture and Society* – notably, the allegedly unresolved semantic instabilities in his use of the term “culture” – “by laying stronger theoretical and empirical foundations”.¹ Yet as other critics have noted, the book remained characteristic of Williams’ style (“as much as collection of essays as a work with a single theme”)² and yet simultaneously more firmly determined to address the urgent political tasks derived from culture analysis and less satisfactory in the overall outcome. As Fred Inglis has noted, *The Long Revolution* “caused quite a stir, and was even more fully noticed than its older sibling.”³ The degree of hostility which it first attracted – notably from the Right, but as we shall, in a very significant way, also from the Left –⁴ coincided with Williams’ full incorporation into the vanguard of the

¹ Gorak, *ibid.*, 57

² Inglis, *ibid.*, 166. Inglis goes on to add: “[i]t is an odd book. Part of it is hurriedly put together without proper links; parts exhibit the self-teaching of someone puzzling out questions better sorted out long ago by other people”, 169-170. And Williams himself admitted in 1979 that it “was a much more developing project even than *Culture and Society*, which of course now seems the more unified book. It was a case of bringing together certain impulses and trying to hold them in some sort of shape.” Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: New Left Review/Books, 1979), 133

³ Inglis, *ibid.*, 170

⁴ As Lin Chun has observed in his standard history of the New Left: “*The Long Revolution* received intense attack from the right, as an alert recognition of its power and quality as a serious socialist work... A ‘long revolution’ unaccompanied by any claim for political power and necessary means to defeat resistance is obviously gradualist with a quite utopian perspective, and this is why it was, again, fiercely criticised by the Marxist critics of the New Left.”, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh

emergent New Left as a leading figure (“our best man”, in Thompson’s words)⁵ and inescapable intellectual referent.

The “long revolution” charted by Williams in the book was, by his own admission, “a difficult revolution to define, and its uneven action is taking place over so long a period that it is almost impossible not to get lost in its exceptionally complicated process.” Yet it was, all the same, “a genuine revolution, transforming men and institutions; continually extended and deepened by the actions of millions, continually and variously opposed by explicit reaction and by the pressure of habitual forms and ideas.”⁶ This complex process had three interweaving strands or lines of development, which in turn constituted “revolutionary” processes of their own: the democratic revolution, the industrial revolution and the cultural revolution. The first accounted for the ongoing and explicit development of power struggles through which the possibility of inclusive decision-making and effective political participation was conceived. The second, for its part, was intimately connected with the productive dimension of society and the technical and scientific mobilisation of material resources. As Williams notes, “[t]he complex interaction between the democratic and industrial revolutions is at the centre of our most difficult social thinking.”⁷ Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly for the general emphasis of the book, the phrase “cultural revolution” sought to account for the even more complex articulation of the new available means and modes of communication with the transformative programme for a common culture.

University Press, 1993), 51. The book also attracted important endorsements from key elements in the broad left, from Labour politician Richard Crossman, who hailed it as “the book I have been waiting for since 1945”, to fellow cultural critic Richard Wollheim, who even linked it to the “English dream”, i.e. “the ideal of collective, unalienated folk society, where honest men work together and create together, the ideal of Ruskin, William Morris, and Leavis.” Inglis, *ibid.*, 170

⁵ See Maria Elisa Cevalco, “Our Best Man”, *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* vol. 9 no. 1 (July 2000).

⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965 [1961]), 10

⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 11

This latter concern offers a thematic springboard for the first section of the book, which opens with a historical analysis of creative activity and theories of creation. In it, Williams returns to the emphases of his concluding remarks in *Culture and Society*, insisting on the inseparability of individual creation from its embodiment as interpersonal meaning in a collective context. Thus:

Communication [of which artistic creation is but one manifestation] is the process of making unique experience into common experience... The ability to live in a particular way depends, ultimately, on acceptance of this experience by others, in successful communication. Thus our descriptions of our experience come to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization.⁸

The essential task is to reconnect the specialised areas of meaning into which an increasingly complex social totality tends to direct its diverse functions, for indeed, “[e]ach kind of activity in fact suffers, if it is wholly abstracted and separated.”⁹

Following closely in the steps of the 1958 book, Williams returns to a summation of his position and general conceptualisation of culture and its analysis as “the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life.”¹⁰ This analysis is fundamentally concerned with the organisation, the patterning, of the component elements in a particular historical reality. Yet even if these are rendered accessible as an intellectual abstraction or precipitate, the living quality of any given period (that is, “a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and

⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 55

⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 56

¹⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 63

living”) remains essentially irretrievable.¹¹ The more or less archaeological reconstruction of what Fromm terms the “social character” of a given historical conjuncture (“a valued system of behaviour and attitudes”) or what Benedict calls the “pattern of culture” (“a selection and configuration of interests and activities, and a particular valuation of them”), still remains essentially impersonal and abstract in nature, far removed from the specific tension of lived experience. In his determination to link the effective analysis of culture to this integral and community-orientated notion of experience, Williams avows the possibility of “gain[ing] a further common element, which is neither the character nor the pattern”.¹² This undefined remainder of a common trait can be isolated through the scrutiny and close study of the art of a period, once individual idiom and general characteristics have been set aside. There remains, in that unstated but defining tegument, “a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression” which nevertheless articulates the deep structure of a given social identity.¹³

The famous coinage which Williams introduces to capture this key aspect of culture, *structure of feeling*, is precisely allusive to the “firm and definite” connotations of the term “structure”, whilst properly referring to “the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity”. “In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization.” The position of the arts in this organisation (and in the retrospective construction or reconstruction of it from a later point in time) is paramount, for here “the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn

¹¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 63

¹² Williams, *ibid.*, 64

¹³ Williams, *ibid.*, 64

upon.”¹⁴ Thus the structure of feeling is the enabling condition on which communication (that is, in turn, the very possibility of bringing community to a real and dynamic actualisation, as the conclusion of *Culture and Society* made clear) is predicated.¹⁵ It supplies the unconscious textures and meanings on which a sense of wholeness, of integrity and organicity, can be erected.

“Our thinking about society is a long debate between abstractions and actual relationships”:¹⁶ the challenge presented by the ongoing “long revolution”, with its manifold components and strands of development, requires a strategic resolution of this opposition. The reduction of a society and social thinking to the levels of politics (the “system of decision”) and economics (the “system of maintenance”) is characteristic of a particular, and historically determined, description of interpersonal relations in which “society” and the “individual” function as hegemonic abstractions. A resolution of this deadlock would necessarily require a repositioning of the terms of antagonism and resistance in a more subjectively relevant perspective of immediate relationships and identities – indeed, of “communicable” social experience. In this respect, available formulae of oppositionality have often incurred a debilitating exposure to and complicity with their critical target, rehearsing, *en bloc*, tools and elements of the hegemonic discourse:¹⁷

¹⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 65

¹⁵ Rainer Winter has noted the proximity of Williams’ concept of communication to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action, which the latter author predicates on an ideal-speech situation bearing a certain resemblance to Williams’ notion of a common culture of shared meanings and values. In both authors (albeit in different ways and to different effects) a primarily functional definition entails political consequences. See Rainer Winter, “The perspectives of radical democracy: Raymond Williams’ work and its significance for a critical social theory”, in Monika Seidl, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *About Raymond Williams* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). See also Andrew Milner, *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism* (London: SAGE, 2002)

¹⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 120

¹⁷ This is also part, as we have seen, of E.P. Thompson’s criticism of the Marxian philosophical stock for its close identification with the conceptual universe of classical political economy.

It has been the greatest error of socialism, in revolt against class societies, to limit itself so often to the terms of its opponents: to propose a political and economic order, rather than a human order. It is of course necessary to see the facts of power and property as obstacles to this order, but the alternative society it has proposed must be in wider terms, if it is to generate the full energies necessary for its creation.¹⁸

In the third and final section of *The Long Revolution* (which, as Fred Inglis notes, “really got read and discussed in the clubs”), Williams identifies the contemporary crisis of the 1950s and early 60s with the breakdown or loss of “an adequate sense of society”. The often critical assessment of reformist or social democratic approaches to wealth redistribution and extension of opportunity rests on a fundamental distortion and lack of integral understanding, argues Williams, of the social process: “[w]e think of my money, my light, in these naïve terms, because parts of our very idea of society are withered at root... In a society whose products depend almost entirely on intricate and continuous co-operation and social organization, we expect to consume as if we were isolated individuals, making our own way.”¹⁹

In this final section, which constitutes a departure from the general tone and orientation of the preceding chapters (and which Williams later explained as responding to “the quite new situation of ’57-9, including to some extent the discussion of *Culture and Society* itself”),²⁰ Williams propounds an extensive notion of communication as the required antidote to the abundant side-effects derived from the process of abstraction

¹⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 131. Thus, “[t]he moral decline of socialism is in exact relation to its series of compromises with older images of society and to its failure to sustain and clarify the sense of an alternative human order”, *ibid.*, 133

¹⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 325

²⁰ “I wanted to be able to develop the position briefly outlined in the conclusion of *Culture and Society*, by a general analysis of contemporary culture and society, a wide structure of feeling in the society as it intersected with institutional developments”, Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 133

which increasingly characterises the modern social experience. The aggressive logic of atomisation threatens to dissolve, in a vortex of private consumption of goods and experiences, the real connections and internal coherences of a complex, industrialised, society.²¹ The obscurity which befalls this steady complexification of “our real relationships” leads to dangerous confusions regarding the actual causes of the overarching problematic. Thus, industrial production, “large-scale organization” or even society itself and its inherent set of pressures, are variously misidentified as contributing factors to the general disorientation:

For my own part I am certain, as I review the evidence, that it is capitalism – a particular and temporary system of organizing the industrial process – which is in fact confusing us. Capitalism’s version of society can only be the market, for its purpose is profit in particular activities rather than any general conception of social use, and its concentration of ownership in sections of the community makes most common decisions, beyond those of the market, limited or impossible.²²

The consolidation of the “mixed economy” and its attendant institutions in the 1950s created the conditions for an ideological recrudescence of the profit-motive and its resilient expressions in the electoral gamble. Revisionism within the Labour Party (under the executive leadership of Hugh Gaitskell and the intellectual patronage of Anthony Crosland) represented a particularly symptomatic adjustment of traditional

²¹ Williams would later develop this analysis through the concept of “mobile privatisation”. See Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1983]), 188; Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1974], 19). See also, Marita Sturken et al. (eds.), *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears That Shape New Technologies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 121; Udo Götlich, “Cultural Studies und das Konzept der “mobilen Privatisierung” im Spiegel der Medien und Öffentlichkeitskritik”, in B. Becker and J. Wehner (eds.), *Kulturindustrie Reviewed: Ansätze zur kritischen Reflexion der Mediengesellschaft*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006). See also below.

²² Williams, *ibid.*, 327

working-class institutionality to the confused dynamics of “affluence” and what the party’s left wing characteristically described as a “meretricious society”.²³ Its fresh projection of Britain as a “post-capitalist” country paved the way for a smooth reinscription of “Socialism” within a consensual system of bi-partisan alternation.²⁴

Against such as backdrop of semantic and structural shifts, Williams’ contention that “the patterns of thinking and behaviour [promoted by capitalism] have never been more strong” necessarily prompts a realignment of terms and analyses which may strategically reposition the programme for a common future:²⁵

The main challenge to capitalism was socialism, but this has almost wholly lost any contemporary meaning, and it is not surprising that many people now see in the Labour Party merely an alternative power-group, and in the trade-union movement merely a set of men playing the market in very much the terms of the employers they oppose. Any such development is generally damaging, for the society is unlikely to be able to grow significantly if it has no real alternative patterns as the ground of choice.²⁶

The suggestion remains, however, in the face of ostensive betrayal (or “revision”), that these institutions (understood, in the formulation of *Culture and Society*, as the great cultural creations of the British working class), in their basic outline of a general social principle – co-operation –, registered a viable, alternative blueprint for the general

²³ The term is Aneurin Bevan’s. See Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, 1945-1960* (St Albans: Paladin, 1975), 584ff. For the ideology of Labour revisionism, see its main theoretical contribution in Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Constable, 2006 [1956]). See also Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951-64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

²⁴ “I conclude that the definition of capitalism in terms of ownership, whether or not it was helpful 100 years ago, has wholly lost its significance and interest now that ownership is no longer the clue to the total picture of social relationships: and that it would be more significant to define societies in terms of equality, or class relationships, or their political systems.”, Anthony Crosland, *ibid.*, 46. See also Dennis Kavanagh and Peter Morris, *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Major* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994)

²⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 328

²⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 328

functioning of society. The thrust of a reinvigorated capitalism notwithstanding, the space of possibility opened up by the continuing existence of these “collective democratic institutions”, lies in the fact that “their crisis is not yet permanently resolved.”²⁷

The fundamental challenge remains the creation and substantiation of “new meanings”: the crucial advancement of an alternative pattern of choices and identifications whereby the margin for democratic practices may be enlarged. The inherent danger of a received institutionality organised around the party system resides in the growing “assumption that direct popular government is not what democracy is about.”²⁸ Thus, a “tightly organized party system and parliament seem to have converted the national franchise into the election of a court”.²⁹

The loss of any real sense of effective participation results from an overbearing allegiance to impersonal processes: the shifts and gradations of popular opinion are slighted in favour of results measured “at the level of the court”, rather than with direct reference to “actual persons”, in what amounts to a brand of “conventional thinking” which, “when it is traced to its sources, is again the tactical wisdom of a defensive autocracy”.³⁰ This alarming estrangement from the parliamentary-democratic process is further complicated by a “relative absence of democracy in other large areas of our lives”:

The crucial area is in work, where in spite of limited experiments in ‘joint consultation’, the ordinary decision process is rooted in an exceptionally rigid and finely-scaled hierarchy, to which the only possible ordinary

²⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 329

²⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 337

²⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 336

³⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 339

responses, of the great majority of us who are in no position to share in decisions, are apathy, the making of respectful petitions, or revolt.³¹

The extension of the principles of managerialism (“man-management, now more grandly renamed personnel management”) again witnesses a substitution of centralised decision-making for any real affirmation of democracy in the workplace. The standard Socialist solution of public ownership is further complicated by the lingering bureaucratic instinct found in the public corporation model and hinted at in the customary objection that “little is gained by substituting a series of still largely authoritarian state monopolies for a series of private monopolies”.³² However, the general tone of “apathy, concession and revolt” alternately rehearsed under conditions of rampant managerialism suggests that an incomparable amelioration in terms of “more rational and responsible solutions” would be achieved through the real extension of participative strategies:

The necessary principle is that workers of all kinds, including managers, should be guaranteed the necessary conditions, including both security and freedom, of their actual work, in precise ways that are perfectly compatible with general decisions about the overall direction of the enterprise... In publicly owned industries and services, and in reformed companies, the principle of boards elected by the members of the industry or service, to operate within the agreed national framework, is surely not difficult.³³

³¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 339

³² “[S]omething is gained, however, to the extent that the state is itself democratically directed”, Williams, *ibid.*, 340

³³ Williams, *ibid.*, 340-341

In Williams' opinion, the inherited repertoire of distinctions allusive to birth and status further distorts the real sources of division generated by post-war British capitalism. The endurance of an older system of nobility and essentially feudal gradation within a solidly capitalist society (explained by the anomalous development of the English bourgeoisie and its consequent compromise with "the class it had virtually defeated" in the nineteenth century)³⁴ survived in the systematic confusions of language and semantics: the traditional identification of an "upper" and a "middle" class terminologically based on hereditary distinction ("upper" and "middle" as opposed to "lower" in a stratification without mobility) was contrasted with the fundamentally economic determination of a "working" class in what seemed like a radically distinct frame of reference.³⁵

The sharp increase in affluence after a period of post-war austerity contributed a further dimension to the received set of contradictions and confusions.³⁶ The 1950s saw an overall increase in material wealth and a corresponding growth in upward identification amongst broad layers of traditionally working-class wage earners. The general movement in patterns of consumption and the rapid expansion of consumer credit involving large sectors of the population paradoxically gave rise to an increasing convergence between the traditionally unpropertied (the working class of an earlier, proletarian, moment) and a presumptive middle class caught up in the expanding circle of credit and illusion.³⁷ As a result, the hegemonic doxa of "affluence" and "welfare" was typically premised on a blurring of real divisions often disguised by the institutionalised differential (between, for example, "salary" and "wage" earners): "[a]s

³⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 346. Here Williams comes close to the analysis advanced by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn in *New Left Review*. See above

³⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 344-345

³⁶ See Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds.), *Age of Austerity 1945-51* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) and David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008)

³⁷ "How many supposedly middle-class people really own their houses, or their furniture, or their cars?", Williams, *ibid.*, 351

we move into this characteristic contemporary world, we can see the supposed new phenomenon of classlessness as simply a failure of consciousness.”³⁸

Williams insists on the need to produce new meanings and descriptions in order to accommodate emerging patterns (“new kinds of work, new forms of capital, new systems of ownership”).³⁹ However, the characteristic modulation of traditional social gradations in the new “managed” capitalism of the 1950s operates within a general drift, not away from but towards, a general “proletarianisation” (a generalisation of hired labour) across virtually the entire economy:

Our true condition is that in relation to a complicated economic and social organization which we have not learned to control, most of us are factually servants, allowed the ordinary grades of upper, middle, and lower, insistent on the marks of these grades or resentful of them, but, like most servants, taking the general establishment for granted and keeping our bickering within its terms.⁴⁰

Against a social background of new communities “where work is very mixed”, a split was generated between the kind of consciousness bestowed by the specific conditions of labour (which Williams terms “trade-union consciousness”) and a larger consciousness (a “Labour consciousness”) “which has to be in terms of a mixed community and a whole society”.⁴¹ In this context, the “affluent worker” can easily dissociate the particular realities of waged work – and the class specificities of the workplace – from a

³⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 352. See also John Westergaard, “The Withering Away of Class: A Contemporary Myth” and Robin Blackburn, “The New Capitalism”, in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn (eds.) *Towards Socialism* (London: Fontana/New Left Review, 1965)

³⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 352

⁴⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 353

⁴¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 360

wider vision and social identity.⁴² Williams recognises the potential of 1950s Conservatism (finally divested of its ominous 1930s aura) for an explicit identification, in the eyes of many people in the new socially mixed communities, with rising trends and patterns of “learning and response”: “[f]or at just this point, Labour seems to have very little to offer. A different version of community, a pattern of new consciousness, it has not been able to give. Its compromise policies combine the two irrelevant elements of appeal to old and fading habits and memories, and of cultural adjustment to the present social confusion.”⁴³

In this sense, both the old party left and the new revisionism appeared to perpetuate the irrelevancy of Labour descriptions to the new configurations of social interaction and consciousness, leaving “the ruling interpretations and directions essentially unchallenged”.⁴⁴ Only the re-statement of a “real feeling of community” – an acceptance of everyone’s involvement in the production of social wealth – could break the deadlock of artificial oppositions and superimposed (and essentially false) antagonisms between different kinds of workers. The old Socialist question of ownership, Williams argues, remains a central constituency of this analysis: and so, the isolation of “that basic inequality” (the continuing ownership and control of “social production” by only one section of the society – that “which then employs the rest”)

⁴²This dissociation was clearly exemplified by Alan Sillitoe in his début novel, *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (London: Flamingo, 1994 [1958]). See Ronald Dee Vaverka, *Commitment as Art: A Marxist Critique of a Selection of Alan Sillitoe’s Political Fiction* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1978). See also John H. Goldthorpe, *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behavior* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1968) and *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1969). For a different sociological perspective, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

⁴³ Williams, *ibid.*, 360-361

⁴⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 361

would automatically refocus the terms of a debate overly muddled by “the survivals, the irrelevancies, and the confusion of other kinds of distinction”.⁴⁵

The growth of cultural institutions in this context must capitalise on the plethora of possibilities offered by an advanced industrial society. Yet it must equally face up to the paradoxes and challenges inherent in a system of economic relations riddled, as the preceding analysis suggests, with contradictions and inequalities of a new type. Williams confronts the basic premise of the book (the notion that “the human energy of the long revolution springs from the conviction that men can direct their own lives, by breaking through the pressures and restrictions of older forms of society, and by discovering new common institutions”)⁴⁶ with the actual state of cultural production and exchange under alleged conditions of “post-capitalist” consensus (in the sense suggested by Crosland). In particular, the fundamental and systematic undermining of artistic freedom – torn between market dynamics and bureaucratic interference – dramatised, for Williams, “the deepest difficulty in the whole development of our democracy”:

[T]hat we seem reduced to a choice between speculator and bureaucrat, and while we do not like the speculator, the bureaucrat is not exactly inviting either. In such a situation, energy is sapped, hope weakens, and of course the present compromise between the speculators and the bureaucrats remains unchallenged.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 363

⁴⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 375

⁴⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 367

This paradox remains one of Williams' long-standing concerns in his analysis and advocacy of democratic enfranchisement for contemporary cultural institutions.⁴⁸ In the specific context of early-Sixties Britain, this preoccupation with the real difficulties confronting cultural production and consumption still rehearse a Leavisite emphasis on minority culture and the distinguished or "great" tradition of canonical practitioners.⁴⁹

This emphasis is evidently modulated into the language and interests of the long revolution and tempered with a critical assessment of the potential distortions associated with Leavis's elitist approach. In the critical framework espoused by Leavis (and Eliot), "[l]ow' equals 'unfamiliar' is one of the perennial cultural traps, and it is fallen into most easily by those who assume that in their own persons, in their own learned tastes and habits, they are the high tradition."⁵⁰ The conservative projection of the great tradition runs the risk of isolating what is truly "a mixed inheritance" culled from "many societies and many times as well as from many kinds of men."⁵¹ The argument for its preservation against the modern onslaught of a massified society and its attendant cultural products prescribes, in Williams' opinion, the promotion of the tradition's general availability. The real danger therefore lurks in a cancerous growth which, threatening the achieved products and practices of a shared social life and its actual communities, substitutes "instead a synthetic culture, or anti-culture" that "reduces us to an endlessly mixed, indiscriminating, fundamentally bored reaction."⁵² In the midst of this characteristic proliferation of the affluent society, the "spirit of everything, art and

⁴⁸ See for example his 1947 article on the "Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect" in John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (eds.), *ibid.*, 41-53

⁴⁹ For Williams' "Leavisite" affiliation, see Lesley Johnson, *The Cultural Critics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)

⁵⁰ Raymond Williams, *Britain in the Sixties: Communications* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 70

⁵¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 74

⁵² Williams, *ibid.*, 71, 74

entertainment, can become so standardized that we have no absorbed interest in anything, but simply an indifferent acceptance.”⁵³

This pseudo-cultural excrescence of modern industrial society was described by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* as a “candy-floss world” characterised by a depletion of emotional and intellectual value. The spurious reproduction of sameness induces a chronic indifference and inability to discern or effectively respond to “any serious suggestion of responsibility and commitment.”⁵⁴ A symptomatic development was to be found in the new publications designed for mass consumption: in these, “[e]verything has gone vicarious: this is puff-pastry literature, with nothing inside the pastry, the ceaseless exploitation of a hollow brightness.”⁵⁵ This overflow of “mass” cultural products engenders a devaluation of the democratic process by promoting “a hypothetical figure” of the new social average – “the common man” – “whose main value is to those who will mislead us.”⁵⁶ In that sense, argues Hoggart, “[w]e are encouraging a sense, not of the dignity of each person but of a new aristocracy, the monstrous regiment [sic] of the most flat-faced.”⁵⁷

It is worth noting that this line of cultural criticism had also been fostered, in the early years of the decade, by the Communist Party itself.⁵⁸ Characteristically, the damaging expansion of a devalued commercial culture had been linked to the hegemonic position of the United States in the wake of the war and its consequent saturation of the British market with American products. Williams takes up this identification of the “synthetic anti-culture” designed for mass consumption in 1950s

⁵³ Williams, *ibid.*, 71

⁵⁴ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 232; see also, Sue Owen (ed.), *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

⁵⁵ Hoggart, *ibid.*, 232

⁵⁶ Hoggart, *ibid.*, 242

⁵⁷ Hoggart, *ibid.*, 181

⁵⁸ Jack Lindsay (ed.) *Arena Special Issue: The U.S.A. Threat to British Culture*, vol. 2, n.8 (June/July 1951)

and 60s Britain with the directive role of America.⁵⁹ The special receptivity demonstrated by the British public responds, according to Williams, to a deep-set rejection of that English minority culture often decried as elitist and therefore inaccessible. The American ego-ideal encapsulates in this context a self-distancing from the burdensome social distinctions of a traditional kind. Thus, “[t]o go pseudo-American is a way out of the English complex of class and culture, but of course it solves nothing; it merely ritualizes the emptiness and despair.” It is the simultaneous exclusivisation of a preserved minority culture in the hands of traditional class distinction and the condescension shown towards a “genuinely popular tradition” which enables the cultural dominance of “the speculators” in their colonisation of common meanings and practices.⁶⁰

As we have seen, the critique of mass culture is, in the analytical fabric woven by Williams, inseparable from the real hegemony of an unbridled market economy committed to an “antiquated system of advertising, which is simply a pre-democratic form of manipulation of a public regarded as ‘masses’”.⁶¹ A truly democratic counter-programme for culture should include a prescription against the “kind of social collapse” which facilitates this noxious proliferation. And this involves, in turn, a head-on confrontation of the market society as the limiting horizon beyond which any real sense of social growth must go.⁶²

Williams’ proposals for Britain in the 1960s are brought together in a general plea for the extension of democracy (the extension of the basic common inheritance of a long, unfinished revolution in social, political and economic life) into ever newer

⁵⁹ This convergence of interests between the *Arena* analysis and Williams’ own was noticed by the *New Left Review* team in 1979. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 112

⁶⁰ Williams, *Communications*, 75

⁶¹ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 375

⁶² Williams, *ibid.*, 325

spheres and domains of participation, retaining a basic commitment to the advancement of life in common as the real basis of collective and individual freedom:

The aim has been there, in many minds, for several generations: to create an educated and participating democracy. We can achieve this only in terms of an advanced industrial society, and the community we are building is and must be a wholly new kind of community, in which the new kinds of communication... must be not only taken into account, but welcomed.⁶³

⁶³ Williams, *Communications*, 99

3. Towards Cultural Materialism

The body of cultural theory produced by Williams in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* (*Communications* should be regarded as an extension of the latter work's concerns) was subject to a number of criticisms from the left which would, in turn, help to shape his subsequent emphases and approaches. E.P. Thompson's review of *The Long Revolution* stands out as perhaps the best critical engagement by a fellow New Leftist, isolating some of the general confusions and limitations detected by socialist opinion in the country.¹

Thompson's essay begins with a generous recognition of Williams' centrality to the movement, which he contrasts with his paradoxical distance – in sources and method – from the mainstream of the socialist intellectual tradition: “[f]or a socialist thinker Mr Williams is extraordinarily curt with the socialist tradition – and indeed in his reference to *any* minority radical tradition.”² This curtness was already apparent, according to Thompson, in *Culture and Society*, where “a procession of disembodied voices – Burke, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold” was substituted for a social totality with its complex interplay of tensions and forces. The overall effect, as other critics had pointed out, could be felt in the deadpan of Williams' style, which resulted from “his determination to depersonalize social forces and at the same time to avoid certain terms and formulations which might associate him with a simplified version of the class struggle.”³ This

¹ E.P. Thompson, “The Long Revolution (Part I)”, *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 9 (May-June 1961); “The Long Revolution (Part II)”, *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 10 (July-August 1961)

² Thompson, “The Long Revolution (Part I)”, 30

³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 26 Victor Kiernan had similarly criticised Williams's lack of contextualisation for “his traditionalists” in *Culture and Society*, who are allowed “to go one after the other, without any

impersonality was further complicated by the debt to Eliot and his problematical notion of culture as “a whole way of life”. Thompson’s criticism dwells on the conceptual imprecision and the underlying ideological motives of this formulation, which appears to ignore the actual distribution of power in a capitalist society. In adhering to this neutral conceptualisation of social processes, the entire structure of antagonism within a class society was overlooked or even naturalised as part of an indistinct whole. In this sense, argued Thompson, to “pass from a ‘way of conflict’ to a ‘way of life’ is to pass out of the main line of the socialist intellectual tradition.”⁴

To this major objection Williams was to respond explicitly in the series of interviews with *New Left Review* published as *Politics and Letters*, and implicitly, in the theoretical modulation, in subsequent years, of his model of the long revolution. Williams’ contention, as articulated in 1979, drew attention to the specific outlook of British society in the post-war period and its general unsuitability to a critical description such as the one derived by Thompson from his historical expertise and dedication to the more “heroic” or obviously conflict-ridden periods:

The term “class struggle” properly refers to the moment at which that structural conflict [class conflict within the capitalist social order] becomes a conscious and mutual contention, an overt engagement of forces. Any socialist account of culture must necessarily include conflict as a structural condition of it as a whole way of life. Without *that* it would be wrong. But if you define the whole historical process as struggle, then you have to elude or foreshorten all the periods in which conflict is mediated in other forms, in

contradiction from him, founding their case on the assumption that what the Industrial Revolution brought to England was something essentially new, and essentially bad.” Kiernan objected that “a procession of individuals does not add up to a class. We are not shown the *literati* in their social setting, as a congerie of class and corporations with specific functions and specific links and points of contact with the other classes.”, *The New Reasoner*, no. 9 (Summer 1959), 78

⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 34

which there are provisional resolutions or temporary compositions of it. I was after all particularly conscious of this, because the fifties in England had precisely been a period... of marked diminution of class struggle in a situation in which there was nevertheless class conflict. Unless one could make this distinction, one was in danger of falling into the rhetoric of “a whole way of struggle”, which was peculiarly unfitted to a time in which what was permanently there as conflict was expressed in terms precisely other than struggle.⁵

The development of British politics in the 1960s – especially after the election of the Wilson government in 1964 and then, with an enlarged majority, in 1966 – laid down the terms for a fresh analysis concerning the nature and effective role of the Labour Party as a significant agent of social change.⁶ The effect of Labour’s second parliamentary majority was, among the New Left, one of “complete revelation” as to what the party had become. The initial distancing impulse of Labour revisionism vis-à-vis the traditional aims and aspirations of British social democracy (to the extent that the 1945-51 government had rehearsed them) was now given the full sanction of power and the full shock of confirmation to those supportive critics – Williams included – whose assessment of Wilson’s overly timid first two years had put the blame on its reduced majority in Parliament. However, the election of March 1966 issued in a new state of affairs (of which a foretaste had been given in the government’s unquestioning support of the United States in the Vietnam War)⁷ which required a fundamental change

⁵ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 135

⁶ See Steven Fielding *The Labour Governments 1964-1970: Labour and Cultural Change* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2003). See also David Howell, *British Social Democracy: A Study in Development and Decay* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), 245-285

⁷ See Ralph Miliband, “Vietnam and Western Socialism”, *Socialist Register*, vol. 4 (1967), 11-25

of orientation from the constructive criticism offered in *The Long Revolution* and *Communications*.

Williams reconstructed this moment of radicalisation and organisational regrouping among the different sensibilities of the New Left in *Politics and Letters*:

Within three months, Wilson was on television doing everything he could to break the seamen's strike, denouncing their leaders as a small group of politically motivated men. Nobody resigned from the Cabinet – it was a very complete revelation of what the Labour Party had become. A month later there was the July sterling crisis, when Wilson's rhetoric could certainly have identified small groups of politically motivated men if this had been even a shadow of a left government – but no, there was deflation and cuts in the social services to defend the exchange rate. Watching these two connected performances, I concluded that this was the end of the road. I decided to leave the Labour Party and write some sort of manifesto, stating very clearly that the Labour Party was no longer just an inadequate agency for socialism, it was now an active collaborator in the process of reproducing capitalist society.⁸

The programmatic outcome of this critical period was the *May Day Manifesto* of 1967, edited by Stuart Hall, Thompson and Williams – and virtually entirely written by Williams himself.⁹ The *Manifesto* (which was published in 1968 by Penguin in a revised version under Williams' editorship) represented a concerted effort, as Stephen Woodhams has recently noted, to re-totalise the fragments in which British capitalism

⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 373 For similarly critical account of the Wilson government, see Rob Sewell, *In the Cause of Labour: History of British Trade Unionism* (London: Wellred Publications, 2003), esp. 273-285

⁹ Chun, *ibid.*, 86

currently sought refuge.¹⁰ The text consequently tackles a multiplicity of issues (housing, health, education, the economy, international politics etc.) in an attempt to co-ordinate a global response to the inertia of the late-Sixties Labour experience. It also included a crucial reflection on the political meaning of Labour's realignment, dwelling on the widening distance of its unfolding project from the historical goals of social democracy, in a way which the Williams of *Politics and Letters* was keen to emphasise and belabour: "social democracy can be that form of socialist struggle which is available as a serious option in societies which have relatively open democratic institutions and the necessary freedoms to use them. Or it can be the gradual assimilation of socialism to the forms of the society which it began by opposing."¹¹

The process of radicalisation that is already detectable in the Williams of the late Sixties, and fully fledged by the following decade, runs parallel – and can be causally related – to his critical engagement, after a prolonged period of isolation from the specific formulas and analyses of the socialist tradition (as Thompson had indicated in his review of *The Long Revolution*), with a certain brand of continental Marxism.¹² The publication of *The Country and the City* in 1973 marks a crucial intermediate stage in this development and confluence of interests and analyses between the relatively idiosyncratic critical language of the early Williams and the "Western Marxism" of Goldmann, Lukàcs and Gramsci. Williams' tackling of the English literary tradition since the eighteenth century, and in particular of its ever-unresolved treatment of the

¹⁰ Stephen Woodhams, "The 1968 *May Day Manifesto*" in Monika Seidl, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *About Raymond Williams* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 61

¹¹ Raymond Williams (ed.) *May Day Manifesto 1968* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 152 See also Raymond Williams, "The British Left", in Gable (ed.), *ibid.*

¹² Seidl, Horak and Grossberg have similarly argued that "[r]ather than seeking to establish a fixed category of 'Western' or 'alternative' Marxism that underlies all his work...our thesis is that, as he grew older, Williams' theoretical work... can be seen to move closer to Marxist thought and to resist the tide of post-structuralism that was rising to dominance in the 1970s and 1980s", in Monika Seidl et al. *ibid.*, 3. Other authors have, on the contrary, stressed a basically Marxist continuity in his thought. See, for example, Paul Jones, *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture. A Critical Reconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004) and Milner, *ibid.*

country/city polarity, attempted to supersede the analytical limitations of a narrow-range formalism (even of the kind brandished by “some recent criticism on the left”),¹³ whilst simultaneously offering a radical reformulation of literature as a process of production.¹⁴

This “return” to the fold of Marxist criticism after the political disaffection experienced in the late Sixties, commenced, for Williams, with a mapping of the theoretical groundwork laid down by 1930s English Marxism and in particular, with its peculiar conceptualisation of cultural processes. Williams points to the “crushing defeat” endured by this unrefined materialist interpretation at the hands of practical criticism and the *Scrutiny* group. A careful consideration of this defeat, he claims, must serve as the preliminary condition from which any fresh confrontation of “the original questions” may be countenanced in the Seventies.

The avowed inferiority of the Old Leftist analysis stemmed, according to Williams, from the reductionism of the base and superstructure formula which invariably informed every cultural analysis. In this simplistic rendition, actual works were denied “precise and detailed... accounts of actual consciousness” and were instead dismissed in a mechanistic isolation of superstructures as mere reflections or spurious ideological by-products of “real” historical dynamics whose sources were to be found in the economy.¹⁵ As Williams explained from the vantage point of 1971, it was a determination to re-chart the sources of a critical reconstruction of cultural formations which would not rely on the abstract and utilitarian categories of the model, that

¹³ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 304

¹⁴ See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993 [1973]); see also John and Lizzie Eldridge, *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* (London: Routledge, 1994), 175-197 and Peter de Bolla, “Antipictorialism in the English Landscape Tradition: A Second Look at *The Country and the City*” in Christopher Prendergast (ed.), *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, “Literature and Sociology – In Memory of Lucien Goldmann”, in *Culture and Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 19

impelled the quite different totalising efforts of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*: “to see the study of culture as the study of relations between elements in a whole way of life... to replace the formula of base and superstructure with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces.”¹⁶

What the encounter with the Marxism of Lukàcs and Goldmann represented was an outlet for this impulse, and what the theory itself propounded was an undogmatic resolution of the vulgar-Marxist quandary. In particular, its promise of totalisation revealed a historical understanding which made sense of the basic tenet of economic preponderance. Lukàcsian reification suggested a specific “deformation”, in capitalism, of the complex of relations within a given society: and so, that this apparent dominance of the economy preached by Marxism was in fact a historical effect of the specific mode of production. Whilst acknowledging methodological limitations in the general idea of totalisation (such as the fact “that most of the work we had to look at [as well as “our own consciousness, our work, our methods”] was the product of just this epoch of reified consciousness”),¹⁷ Williams credited Goldmann, in particular, with significant advances in the field.

Goldmann’s development and application of the concept of structure suggested a specific *genetic* relationship between particular literary and social facts.¹⁸ This was not to be understood as a correlation of contents but, crucially, as a co-development of mental structures: “[a] relation of content may be mere reflection, but a relation of structure, often occurring where there is no apparent relation of content, can show us the

¹⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 20

¹⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 21

¹⁸ See Lucien Goldmann, *Pour une Sociologie du Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964)

organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group which maintains it, really operates in consciousness.”¹⁹

This theoretical point was supplemented by the distinction between “actual” and “possible” consciousness, that is, between the multiform and often incoherent worldview *actually* found in the historical experience of a particular social group/class and the more formalised and in that sense, advanced, projection of the group.²⁰ In this perspective, a genetic-structural sociology of literature would be concerned with analysing “the organizing categories, the essential structures, which give such works their unity, their specific aesthetic character... and which at the same time reveal to us the maximum possible consciousness of the social group”.²¹ Williams nevertheless recognises that his own concept of the structure of feeling – despite the obvious parallel with Goldmann’s concerns – was a way of circumventing what he interpreted as the real distance between either formation of consciousness and “the real structures and processes of literature.”²²

His search for a resilient alternative to the dead-ends of Leavisite practical criticism, on one hand, and vulgar Marxist reductionism, on the other, set Williams on a meandering journey through the complexities of a theoretical revisionism – after the idiosyncratic engagements of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* – whose first significant port of call had been, precisely, the work of Lukàcs and Goldmann. This encounter involved, first of all, a fresh restatement of the basic conceptual tools of the Marxist stock, beginning with the much abused formula of base and superstructure.

¹⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 23

²⁰ See Lucien Goldmann, *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, trans. by Brat Grahll (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977)

²¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 24

²² Williams, *ibid.*, 24

Williams is particularly critical of the abstract manoeuvring implicit in the scholastic differentiation between these two terms. In his opinion, the “force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the *separation* of ‘areas’ of thought and activity... and against the related evacuation of specific content – real human activities – by the imposition of abstract categories.”²³ The deterministic character of the traditional model (in which the economic base of a given society is said to *determine* its superstructures) revealed a fundamental set of problems regarding, first, the precise nature (and semantic scope) of this “determination” and second, the specific range of definition included in the terms base and superstructure.

The notion of determination was soon associated, in a certain stock of Marxist thought, with a sense of absolute conditioning rooted in an external system of economic relations. According to this “economistic” reading, the abstract determination exerted by the economic base upon the cultural superstructure was in the manner of a full prefiguration disconnected from any real sense of lived human process. An alternative characterisation was that which restored the idea of direct human agency to the workings of historical development and therefore challenged the monolithic abstraction of economic forces from a measurable historical objectivity. The standard justification for this challenge to economism was found in Engels’ classic disclaimer in his 1890 letter to Bloch: “we make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions.”²⁴ This qualifying statement gave a different angle to the idea of determination: history was effectively the province of human agency and not the disembodied resultant of pre-figured “iron laws”. In this sense, stating that “the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of human

²³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1977), 78; in this particular emphasis Williams comes very close to the Thompson of *The Poverty of Theory*, see above.

²⁴ Friedrich Engels in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 641

life” consigns man-made history to a precise set of objective conditions but it does not revoke its relative autonomy in favour of an empty teleology: “Any abstraction of determinism, based on the isolation of autonomous categories, which are seen as controlling or which can be used for prediction, is then a mystification of the specific and always related determinants which are the real social process – an active and conscious as well as, by default, a passive and objectified historical experience.”²⁵

The notion of economic base, for its part, was severely impaired in the more vulgar characterisations of the model by a narrow range of definition. Its strict identification with economic activity – that is, the mechanistic reduction of that primary point of reference, “the production and reproduction of real life”, to a “fixed economic or technological abstraction” – supposed a disabling conceptual limitation which made economism well-nigh ineluctable.²⁶ This resulted, crucially, from the narrow description of productive forces in the context – and the terms – of historical capitalism. The danger was often real, in Marxism, of “slip[ping] into describing them as if they were universal and general, and as if certain ‘laws’ of their relations to other activities were fundamental truths. Marxism thus often took the colouring of a specifically bourgeois and capitalist kind of materialism.”²⁷

This essentialisation of the particular dynamics of commodity production within a capitalist economy evicted every other area of (re-)production from the axis of social life. And yet, as Williams observes, “[t]he social and political order which maintains a capitalist market, like the social and political struggles which created it, is necessarily a material production”.²⁸ Its real derivation cannot be labeled “superstructural” and left at

²⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 87-88

²⁶ Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, in *Culture and Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 34

²⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 92

²⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 93

that. Analogously, the brand of materialism which discarded political and social structures from the effective matrix of production could not but disregard cultural practices as equally inessential. In that precise sense, “the concept of the ‘superstructure’ was ... not a reduction, but an evasion.”²⁹

The kind of aesthetic theory to which the vulgar model of base and superstructure typically gave rise was tied to a limiting conception of the “real world” as a series of discrete objects – “including human actions as objects”. This mechanistic version of materialism contrasted with a more flexible conception of real social relations as processes. In this perspective, then, “art could be seen as reflecting not separated objects and superficial events but the essential forces and movements underlying them”.³⁰ Williams’ criticism of reflection theories is directed against the paralysing impulse which their version of aesthetic production propounded. The radical division introduced between a reified conception of social activity and the sphere of culture understood as a passive reflection of the former resulted in a negation of the very materiality and processual character of the art work and its domain of intervention. It was precisely against this fossilisation of a complex material dynamic that the notion of “mediation” was introduced to account for the peculiarity of cultural activity. However, as Williams acknowledges:

It is difficult to be sure how much is gained by substituting the metaphor of ‘mediation’ for the metaphor of ‘reflection’. On the one hand it goes beyond the passivity of reflection theory; it indicates an active process, of some kind. On the other hand, in almost all cases, it perpetuates a basic dualism.

Art does not reflect social reality, the superstructure does not reflect the

²⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 93

³⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 96

base, *directly*; culture is a mediation of society. But it is virtually impossible to sustain the metaphor of ‘mediation’ (*Vermittlung*) without some sense of separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality, between which the mediating process occurs whether independently or as determined by their prior natures.³¹

Subsequent theoretical innovations, whilst addressing the evident limitations of the reflection model, still adhered to the dualistic logic consecrated by the base-superstructure binomial. Both the idea of typification and homology (even in the more “advanced” theorisations of Lukàcs and Goldmann, respectively) suggested a static analysis of known structures which ruled out the possibility of active process and real intervention:

None of the dualist theories, expressed as reflection or mediation, and none of the formalist and superstructuralist theories, expressed in variants of correspondence or homology, can be fully carried through to contemporary practice, since in different ways they all depend on a *known* history, a known structure, known *products*. Analytic relations can be handled in this way; practical relations hardly at all.³²

Williams’ enthusiastic invocation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony was offered as an apt alternative to this theoretical universe of objectification and stasis. The comparative advantage represented by the notion of hegemony over, for example, the notion of totality was that the former did not overlook the specific class intentionality of a given social formation. As a conceptual means of dispelling the blatant inadequacy of a mechanical materialism premised on base and superstructure, the notion of totality had

³¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 99

³² Williams, *ibid.*, 106-107

provided the foundations of a complex interpretation of social practices without abstract prefigurations or determinism. Yet the sometimes overhasty acceptance of models of totality ran the risk of ignoring, precisely, the one aspect which the theory of base and superstructure had isolated best; that is, “the facts of social intention, the class character of a particular society” and hence the materialist specification of any subsequent historical analysis. For “[i]f totality is simply concrete, if it is simply the recognition of a large variety of miscellaneous and contemporaneous practices, then it is essentially empty of any content that could be called Marxist. Intention, the notion of intention, restores the key question, or rather the key emphasis.”³³

The logic of hegemony presupposes a totality in which the facts of class domination are asserted not in a specialised, abstract sense (as suggested by the notion of superstructure and a certain Marxist inflection of the term “ideology”), but in a complex and multi-modal fashion even to the point of “constitut[ing] the substance and the limit of common sense for most people under its sway”.³⁴ In its Gramscian derivation, hegemony was distinguished from *dominio*, that is, explicit political control in a given social formation. The term suggested an effective penetration of class rule and a specific distribution of power throughout the social tissue which was not restricted to any single sphere of specialisation: “[i]t is in just this recognition of the *wholeness* of the process that the concept of ‘hegemony’ goes beyond ‘ideology’. What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.”³⁵

The notion of hegemony was also distinct from the earlier concept of culture as a whole social process or a “whole way of life”: whilst retaining the same emphasis on

³³ Williams, “Base and Superstructure”, 36

³⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 37

³⁵ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 108-109

inclusion, the facts of actual power gave the totality a particular orientation and historical identity. In Gramsci, the concept was very closely connected to that of “civil society”, understood as the operative domain of a ruling worldview beyond the “political society” of positive institutions. What singles out a hegemonic ideology (what marks its implantation as a “hegemonic bloc”) is, precisely, its homogenous and porous distribution across the totality of a social formation, often acquiring a naturalised existence – as “common sense”, for example – beyond the external exertions of a state apparatus. The role of “organic” intellectuals is central to the maintenance of hegemony and to the preservation of structural domination by the ruling class.³⁶

Gramsci stresses the importance of intellectual monopoly within civil society – the strategic position accorded to those intellectuals who are *organically* linked to the empowered class.³⁷ The solid position of these intellectuals within civil society (their identification with “progress” within the historic bloc) facilitates the advancement of a particular ideology which consolidates the hegemonic claims of its class subject. It is the task of these intellectuals, first, to “assimilate and conquer” the representatives of “traditional” groups,³⁸ and to obtain, from all other sections of the social structure, a fundamental endorsement of their hegemonic bloc – and consequently, of the social and economic interests of the class which it seeks to uphold.

Williams is unambiguous about the need to flexibilise the Gramscian concept and, crucially, to avoid excluding oppositional possibilities from the hegemonic matrix:

³⁶ So called because of their constitutive role in enforcing an organic link between the previously differentiated areas of an economic base and the associated superstructures. Gramsci calls the resultant totality of this organic articulation *historic bloc*. See Hugues Portelli, *Gramsci et le bloc historique* (Paris: P.U.F., 1972) and Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982). See also Stuart Hall, “Gramsci and Us” in *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988)

³⁷ See James Martin (ed.), *Intellectuals, Culture and the Party. Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Harold Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)

³⁸ Simon, *ibid.*, 93

A static hegemony, of the kind which is indicated by abstract totalizing definitions of a dominant 'ideology' or 'world-view', can ignore or isolate such alternatives and opposition, but to the extent that they are significant the decisive hegemonic function is to control or transform or even incorporate them. In this active process the hegemonic has to be seen as more than the simple transmission of an (unchanging) dominance. On the contrary, any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural process must always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony.³⁹

The historical analysis of a particular culture then requires a detailed account of those tendencies which operate within but also surpass or exceed the actual conditions of "a specific and effective dominance".⁴⁰ The hegemonic perspective must therefore discriminate between the various trends or forces which make up a given totality.

Williams' taxonomical contribution to this hegemonic model specifically distinguishes between *dominant*, *residual* and *emergent* aspects of a culture. Thus, while dominant expressions are clearly placed at the core of the hegemonic formation, underpinning those elements in the specific practices of the ruling class which give it pre-eminence over other classes, alternative and even oppositional components of the culture must also be included in any general description of the social whole. A description of residual practices cannot be conflated or univocally identified with

³⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 113

⁴⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 121

“archaic” expressions within the culture (that is, with those elements which are fully inscribed within a past articulation):

What I mean by the ‘residual’ is very different. The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual (this being its distinction from the archaic) which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture.⁴¹

Williams offers three characteristic examples in contemporary English culture which illustrate this double aspect of the residual: “organized religion”, for one, expresses an evidently residual dimension of advanced bourgeois culture, inherited from a past social formation and yet accommodated within dominant structures. However, its ambivalence rests on the combination of effectively counter-hegemonic – that is, alternative and sometimes even frankly oppositional – meanings and values (“absolute brotherhood, service to others without reward”) and those incorporated aspects (“official morality, or the social order of which the other-worldly is a separated neutralising or ratifying component”)⁴² which reinforce the dominant set of meanings and values. Similarly, the

⁴¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 122

⁴² Williams, *ibid.*, 122

idea and imagery of rural life can sometimes counterpose a logic of resistance to the forms of urban/industrial capitalism whilst simultaneously purveying a fanciful or escapist complementarity to the ruling order. The eminently archaic instance of the monarchy is finally given as an example of the controlling function which even such a scarcely oppositional expression can have (“marking the limits as well as the methods”) in a capitalist democracy. It is therefore the distinctive role of the residual to articulate whole areas of meaning rooted in some past totality as part of the present one “if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas.”⁴³

On the other hand, the logic of emergence must attempt, for all the practical difficulties, to distinguish between those elements which, within a given culture, effectively signal the rise of a new social reality (i.e. those elements which, on account of their actual oppositionality, can be rigorously described as “emergent”), and those which merely indicate “some new phase of the dominant culture”.⁴⁴ In that sense, a “new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively subordinate, this is always likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete.”⁴⁵ Williams here hints at the classic Gramscian description of the proletariat (the emergent class in a capitalist society) as continuously forestalled in its revolutionary mission by the workings of hegemony. Thus, what characterises this class in Western societies (where civil society is strong, in contradistinction to, for example, pre-revolutionary Russian society) is its “corporate” character, that is, its effective subordination to the hegemonic articulation of reality promoted by the ruling class. The transformation of this class into a real agent of change necessarily requires, as its preliminary step, the conversion of its position in the hegemonic structure as a truly

⁴³ Williams, *ibid.*, 122-123

⁴⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 123

⁴⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 124

dominant force beyond the pitfalls of “incorporation”. By this last term, Williams means that operation which, as it were, defuses the transformative potential of any emergent social practice, re-inscribing it under the sign of dominance and closure:

Straight incorporation is most directly attempted against the visibly alternative and oppositional class elements: trade unions, working-class political parties, working-class life styles (as incorporated into ‘popular’ journalism, advertising, and commercial entertainment). The process of emergence, in such conditions, is then a constantly repeated, an always renewable, move beyond a phase of practical incorporation: usually made much more difficult by the fact that much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*.⁴⁶

Cultural emergence therefore rests on the creation of real, systemic conditions of transformation: any truly emergent form must, in that sense, break through the inherited limitations of the hegemony which it seeks to move beyond. However, the emergent is not necessarily found in ready-made or directly accessible expressions – these are for the most part still subject to the logic of incorporation and thus tend to signpost novelty within the dominant set. On the contrary, effective emergent culture “is never only a matter of immediate practice”:

[I]t depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named. It is to understand more closely the condition of pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the

⁴⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 125

emergent, the residual, and the dominant, that we need to explore the concept of structures of feeling.”⁴⁷

Williams’ great theoretical innovation, the notion of *structure of feeling*, addresses the problematical tendency in cultural thinking to transmogrify the facts of social experience into the reified products of an impersonal observation. This self-defeating gesture typically engenders an analytical paralysis whereby “relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes.”⁴⁸

By contrast, an accurate description of cultural change within a given social totality and its hegemonic organisation must be attentive to the processual quality expressed in its practical consciousness: for it is here, in “what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived” that the observable facts of social existence are found.⁴⁹ The term “structure of feeling” aims, precisely, at a totalising and *experiential* – that is, non-reified – reconstruction of lived meanings and values as a particular historical reality organises them. Yet these are not reducible to formalised systems of belief or consciousness; on the contrary, the distribution is characteristically affective, manifested in lived (and therefore fluctuating) forms of individual and trans-individual experience. As Williams points out, this cultural hypothesis is particularly relevant to descriptions concerning art and literature, for in these social content is distributed in the peculiar mode of an affective, indirect and informal manner. As a result, structures of feeling “can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct

⁴⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 126-127

⁴⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 128

⁴⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 131

from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available.”⁵⁰

One of the central contentions of *Marxism and Literature* was the need to interrogate, problematise and finally revoke the concepts of literature and criticism as they were hegemonically constituted in specialised discourse. As Williams put it in *Politics and Letters*: “[t]here would be absolutely no need to reject the concept of literature ... if it still meant what it did in the 18th century: a group of written works of a certain level of seriousness, capable of sustaining an attention that others could not.” However, the real effects of specialisation, since the 19th century, had generated a compartmentalised area of writing “secluded from the kinds of correlation with social reality which in principle were always there”.⁵¹ An associated consequence of this specialisation had been the obscuring of processes and modes of production and composition in other kinds of writing which were not, procedurally, dissimilar from those customarily acknowledged in the “reserved area” of literature.

Similarly, the established practice of criticism courts a danger of dissolution of the real conditions of production of a particular text, making judgment of a specialised, so-called literary, kind a direct threat to any significant engagement with the actual historicity – the structure of feeling – of which the text partakes. Williams describes this argument as “a clearing operation” taking aim, beyond the kind of individualist-elitist criticism of a Leavis, at the “pseudo-impersonal attempt to judge works without any sense of the presence of the individual making a critical judgement”.⁵² The polemical target is here primarily the New Criticism (“the immediate predecessor of structuralism”) and its claims on objectivity and exteriority from the judging process.

⁵⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 133-134

⁵¹ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 326

⁵² Williams, *ibid.*, 335

However, Williams is adamant not to confine this general conceit of the critical operation to a particular school or tendency, but rather to situate it at the core of criticism proper qua specialised function of literature. His materialist counter-proposal calls for a re-connection or reinscription of judgment of this kind within its specific conditions of production. It is only by extending the analytical focus to the totality of relations which, in the first place, accommodate the critical function that an effective material account of the whole process (of production and reception) can be achieved:

Our response to writing does then become a much more extended practice than this quite extraordinarily privileged area in which the reader is put in the position of a judge, which I don't think anybody can assume without damage. Criticism leads to the hypostatization of the critic *above* the process: making judgments *inside* the process, in the way people do in everyday contemporary argument, is a very different matter.⁵³

This proposed inclusion of critical judgment of a non-specialised kind within the very process of textual production is central to a solid comprehension of the cultural materialist project and its wider political remit as an *enabling* theoretical hypothesis pointing the way for a radical reconceptualisation of culture and society.

The formulation of the cultural materialist agenda can be read as a crucial theoretical supplement (and a methodological detour, as it were) conditioned by the bitter political experience of the Wilson governments in the late Sixties. Thus, its conceptual sophistication – with the tools of continental Marxism – of the initial model of culture (as developed in *Culture and Society*) allowed Williams to resume the basic outline of his critique of contemporary British society (in *The Long Revolution*) whilst

⁵³ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 336

circumventing the ideological traps of a reformist agenda. As we shall see in the following section, his later work sought to carve out a measure of novelty, hope and possibility (considerably refined and mediated by this “cultural materialist” phase of his reflection) beyond the inherited social, cultural, political and economic structures of an obsolete nation-state and its inscription within the hegemonic parameters of multinational capitalism.

4. The Return(s) of Community: Class, Nation, and “the desire called utopia”

Towards 2000 represents a reappraisal of the terms of analysis laid down in *The Long Revolution* for their confrontation with a new period of capitalist expansion and ideological recrudescence: the 1980s. Beyond the particular circumstances of Thatcherism –¹ to which Williams devotes a significant portion of his inquiry – the general condition affecting parliamentary politics in Britain is analysed through the previously rehearsed problematic of (what Williams had typified in 1961 as) the vast subsumption of democratic practice within the logic of capitalist exchange. According to this analysis, the primary check on foreseeable democratic extension within the terms and limits of “parliamentary democracy as we know it” was exerted by the ritualistic gamble of electoral calculation: “[a] whole style of political consumerism, in which there need not be any hard choices, takes over as the essence of politics, and then has an evident congruence with the styles of commodity consumerism, similarly stimulated and financed by a manufactured credit.”²

In this context, programmatic choice, the ordinary expression of political alternatives within the party system, becomes divested of any precise reference to

¹ For the defining traits of the “Thatcherite” phenomenon, which invariably forms the background of radical social criticism in the Eighties, see for example, Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Macmillan, 1988), Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (London: Routledge, 2004), Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1987) and José Francisco Fernández Sánchez, *El Thatcherismo. Historia y Análisis de una Época* (Almería: Universidad de Almería, 1999). See also, Alwyn W. Turner, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* (London: Aurum, 2010) and Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010)

² Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1983]), 9

principle or committed realisation. Prevalent styles of social consumption reduce an entire, and hitherto dominant mode of temporal construction or reconstruction of society in the political programme or manifesto (“the only widely available form of positive thinking about the future”),³ to a void game of opportunity in a market-like exchange:

The full scale of what can be rationally predicted, or at least of what has to be allowed for with some degree of possibility, is excluded or foreshortened to permit more persuasive or less disturbing short-term programmes. Or, through failure after failure, the idea of gaining some effective common controls of our future is steadily given up, leading on the one hand to a culture of nostalgia, on the other to the cruder politics of temporary tactical advantage.⁴

Williams identifies this latter trend in “actually existing” parliamentary democracies with a debased form of rational prediction and projection which he generically describes as “Plan X”. Plan X thinking implies a ruling out of long-term solutions or projects as a conceivable possibility by which to guide a given political effort. This orientation is not exclusive to any one political tendency or party, but is to be found diffusely in the general outlook of parties, trades unions and individuals within a systemic vacuum of alternative horizons:

A phase at a time, a decade at a time, a generation at a time, the people who play by Plan X are calculating relative advantage, in what is accepted from the beginning as an unending and unavoidable struggle. For this is percentage politics, and within its tough terms there is absolute contempt for

³ Williams, *ibid.*, 9

⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 12

those who believe that the present and the future can be managed in any other way.⁵

This systematic emaciation of possibility as an effective – rather than illusory, as hegemonic versions of Plan X would have it – guide to political action, often results in a compensatory empowering of utopian imagination as a means of escaping or circumventing these barriers. The traditional utopian mode or systematic utopianism from Thomas More to William Morris gives way in more contemporary conjunctions to a heuristic version of particular demands and calls for inclusion: this latter conception of Utopia is typically linked, in the context of advanced capitalism, to specific formations of desire – and is characteristically expressed as “an imaginative encouragement to feel and to relate differently, or to strengthen and confirm existing feelings and relationships which are not at home in the existing order and cannot be lived through in it.”⁶

The inherent limitations of this mode spring from the particular susceptibility of its more private and subjective versions (“as so often in the 1960s”) to incorporation within the general style of consumption as yet another buttress of the existing social order.⁷ Williams however insists on the symptomatic validity of these challenges – partial and unsystematic, at worst, rigorous and thorough-going, at best, yet always expressive of an urgency to modify the terms and conditions of common life. His own sort of cultural materialist hermeneutics are credited with the comparative advantage of

⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 245

⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 13

⁷ This is similar to the process of cooptation to which the avant-garde – and more generally, Modernism – was historically subjected: “[w]hat has quite rapidly happened is that Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism. Its attempt at a universal market, transfrontier and transclass, turned out to be spurious. Its forms lent themselves to cultural competition and the commercial interplay of obsolescence, with its shift of schools, styles and fashion so essential to the market. The painfully acquired techniques of significant *disconnection* are relocated, with the help of the special insensitivity of the trained and assured technicians, as the merely technical modes of advertising and the commercial cinema. The isolated, estranged images of alienation and loss, the narrative discontinuities, have become the easy iconography of the commercials, and the lonely, bitter, sardonic and skeptical hero takes his ready-made place as star of the thriller”. Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007 [1989]), 35

offering a “total” – that is, integrated and exhaustive – critique of the social order beyond the epistemological fragmentation (into “specialist ‘areas’ of society”) of earlier approaches: “it is only by continuing to attend to a whole lived social order, and at the same time identifying the primary determining forces within it, that this kind of general humanist analysis can significantly contribute to thinking about the future.”⁸

The uses of totality found within Williams’ cultural Marxism of the Seventies are now mobilised, in the dire context of Thatcherite Britain, as vital resources of systematic opposition and as primary foundations for a language of radical social transformation. Beyond the immediate references of an earlier reformism – that which subtends the project of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* – the return of a strategic commitment to the notion of “a whole way of life” expresses a renovated affinity with utopian thought and projective social practice.

The key temporal dimension explored in a novel such as *The Fight for Manod* or in a certain analysis of the modern city in *The Country and the City*⁹ – the future as concrete social possibility – is positivised in this social critique of the Eighties as the effective benchmark of any viable Socialism. The logic of futurity which an earlier faith in programmatic expression typically registered, before the advent of Plan X fatalism, is still to be sought out in the hopeful practice of a socialist imagination grounded in the idea of possibility. This must entail a determination to avoid the limiting terms of a received conceptuality, “an inherited sense of what a society is and should be” and advance towards a fresh set of definitions where the human reality of a living and lived

⁸ Williams, *Towards 2000*, 15

⁹ *The Fight for Manod* completes the “Welsh trilogy” begun with *Border Country* and *Second Generation*. In that novel, Williams returns to the rural landscape of mid-Wales, confronting a new set of challenges and possibilities in the form of a plan for the urban development of the region. This concern with the ambivalent (yet simultaneously hopeful) projection of urban futures resonated also, with ringing insistence, throughout *The Country and the City*. See Williams, *The Country and the City*, esp. 272-288. See also, Raymond Williams, *The Fight for Manod* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979)

complex of relationships may take over from prevalent notions of utility both right and left.¹⁰

This fundamental reorientation, which the bleak prospect of an arch-reactionary decade enhances, confirms the continuing relevance and validity of the main lines of inquiry outlined by the 1961 paradigm of “the long revolution.” According to the analysis of 1983, the latter can still be properly described as industrial if we move away from a narrow determinism which chooses to ignore the defining nature of relations of production focusing instead on technological modifications within productive forces. For, in effect, the “point of entry for an analysis, either of the fundamental nature of the industrial revolution or of the severe crisis of industrial society which we are now beginning to experience, is the idea of *employment*.”¹¹

Within this ideological horizon, social relations of every kind are insistently reinscribed within a “narrow scheme of production for the market”, reducing the virtual entirety of its human world to a position of practical subordination. Most tellingly, the idea of work itself is subsumed within the utilitarian rationale of capitalist production, generating a selective system of definitions and relegations. Thus, for example, “[a]ll that work which is the nurture and care of human beings, on whom the entire system depends, is excluded unless it is paid employment.”¹² This overarching conception of production, developed to the utmost in advanced capitalism, is however not exclusive to capitalist forms of property and waged labour. For this general orientation towards the world as a “raw material” is equally palpable in traditional socialist approaches (otherwise “we would have no way of explaining the continuing appropriation and exploitation of the world... in the ‘communist’ or ‘actually existing socialist’

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, “Problems of the Coming Period”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *ibid.*, 173

¹¹ Williams, *Towards 2000*, 85

¹² Williams, *ibid.*, 89

economies”). A gaining of emancipatory consciousness in this context requires an understanding “that this orientation to the world as raw material necessarily includes an attitude to people as raw material.”¹³

This rampant exploitation reaches a totalitarian climax with the inclusion of human personality in its range of marketable and disposable objects, both in the devastation of interpersonal relationships (“[f]ailure in such versions of relationship is wholly predictable since relationship is precisely an alternative to the use of others as raw material”) and in “the cruel punishment of self” (“in alcoholism, in addiction to dangerous drugs, in obesities and damaging asceticisms”).¹⁴ Marxism itself, observes Williams (in a related emphasis to Thompson’s in *The Poverty of Theory*) is not exempted from this exploitative orientation and commitment to a utilitarian notion of production. It was, in Marx, this complicity, this “open triumphalism in the transformation of nature” shared with his capitalist enemies, which ultimately prevented the “outline of a fully alternative society.”¹⁵

The totalising epistemology of cultural materialism (founded, as we have seen, upon the overcoming of spurious divisions and relegations in the field of cultural/social production) finds its proper programmatic political correlate in an equally totalising analysis of social alternatives which may go beyond the limiting rationality of utilitarianism. This crucial opening to action requires a replacement of the ruling representations of “‘society as production’ with the broader concept of a form of human relationships within a physical world: in the full sense, a way of *life*.”¹⁶ This fundamental substitution is not to be lightly dismissed in terms of an opposition

¹³ Williams, *ibid.*, 261

¹⁴ Williams, *ibid.*, 263

¹⁵ Williams, *ibid.*, 264

¹⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 266

between rational and emotional demands. “For it is in what it dismisses as ‘emotional’ – a direct and intransigent concern with actual people – that the old consciousness most clearly shows its bankruptcy”:

Emotions, it is true, do not produce commodities. Emotions don’t make the accounts add up differently. Emotions don’t alter the hard relations of power. But where people live, what is specialised as ‘emotional’ has an absolute and primary significance.

This is where the new broad concept most matters. If our central attention is on whole ways of life, there can be no reasonable contrast between emotions and rational intelligence. The concern with forms of whole relationship excludes these specialised and separated projections.¹⁷

The need to go beyond the abstractions and divisions of a particular social order and its associated worldview is expressed as the more concrete need to ground our social experience in specific practices of community, in tangible patterns of human relationship, in work, creativity and cooperation.

The language of culture and communication, which informed Williams’ analyses of the late Fifties and Sixties, now returns as a complex materialist logic of totality in which the emancipatory vision of society is equally inseparable from a realist ontology of the social. Society is, for the Williams of 1983, experientially mediated in the way that “culture” in his early work was a primary mode of articulation of collective life as lived experience. The “realism” implicit in this view is perceptible in the refusal (which “cultural materialism” makes clear at the level of artistic and literary analysis) to separate or specialise orders of existence according to a dominant pattern of social

¹⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 266

organisation. The “whole way of life” of social experience is therefore a complex and determinate (yet not deterministically conditioned) horizon in which a living multiplicity interacts and produces values and meanings with a specific reference to its human world. These values and meanings are practically inseparable from a sense of place and belonging, a particular notion of origin which may be private in expression (as in the discourse of biographical experience) yet whose collective bearings – in a genetic and procedural sense – are undeniable.

This was the “realistic” position voiced in fictional form in *Border Country* and in analytical terms in *The Long Revolution*, a position which lays the groundwork for a vital reinscription of “possibility” and “hope” of a specifically democratic socialist kind within the rehearsed coordinates of community: “[u]nless we achieve some realistic sense of community, our true standard of living will continue to be distorted. As it is, to think about economic activity in the limited terms of the consumer and the market actually disguises what many of us are doing, and how the pattern of economic life is in any case changing.”¹⁸

Towards 2000 resumes this basic theme in the “pivotal essay” on “The Culture of Nations”,¹⁹ where the older conceptuality of culture as a whole way of life meets the specific discursivity of nationality and nationalism as a particular horizon for community. The abstraction of social identity implicit in modern capitalism produces a basic antagonism between the sources of human experience (the fact that “[w]e are born into relationships, and we live and grow through relationships”) and the impersonal categories derived from a “mobile privatisation” of collective life.²⁰ This inertia of abstraction is characteristically expressed in the “formal legal definitions” of the nation-

¹⁸ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 325

¹⁹ Williams, *Towards 2000*, 20

²⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 188

state and, generally, in its “artificial” cooptation of “primary” and “placeable” forms of bonding. As such, the nation-state subsumes, within its complex apparatus of positive juridical reference, a wealth of local continuities through which the basic human need of belonging finds expression. The fundamental distortion operated by this hegemonic form lies precisely in its deliberate appropriation of real social urges and tendencies with the distinct purpose of legitimising a particular group in power. In Williams’ analysis, this deflection of primary social attachments into a formally organised expression of class rule motivates a crucial discrimination between nation and region:

What has then happened is that the real and powerful feelings of a native place and a native formation have been pressed and incorporated into an essentially political and administrative organisation, which has grown from quite different roots. ‘Local’ and ‘regional’ identities and loyalties are still allowed, even at a certain level encouraged, but they are presumed to exist within, and where necessary to be overridden by, the identities and the loyalties of this much larger society.²¹

Yet only in the absence of division, in the assertion of common experience and in the factual maintenance of such experience through real, collectively-lived arrangements of work, creation or resistance, can a viable oppositional politics arise with a claim to totality and resilience:

A socialist position of social identity certainly rejects, absolutely, the divisive ideologies of ‘race’ and ‘nation’, as a ruling class functionally employs them. But it rejects them in favour of lived and formed identities either of a settled kind, if available, or of a possible kind, where dislocation

²¹ Williams, *ibid.*, 181

and relocation require new formation. It happens that I grew up in an old frontier area, the Welsh border country, where for centuries there was bitter fighting and raiding and repression and discrimination, and where, within twenty miles of where I was born, there were in those turbulent centuries as many as four different everyday spoken languages. It is with this history in mind that I believe in the practical formation of social identity – it is now very marked there – and know that necessarily it has to be lived. Not far away there are the Welsh mining valleys, into which in the nineteenth century there was massive and diverse immigration, but in which, after two generations, there were some of the most remarkably solid and mutually loyal communities of which we have record. *These are the real grounds of hope. It is by working and living together, with some real place and common interest to identify with, and as free as may be from external ideological definitions, whether divisive or universalist, that real social identities are formed.*²²

The “grounds of hope” are thus indistinguishable for an empirical foundation of collective life: beyond abstract derivations or calls to action, it is ultimately in an experiential dimension – in a charged sense of place – that Utopia may be found. As Fredric Jameson wrote in *The Political Unconscious*, “one of the most urgent tasks for Marxist theory today” is the activation of “a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience.”²³ The idea of the nation is one particular area – as his enthusiastic assessment of Tom Nairn’s *The Break-up of Britain*, attests – for the

²² Williams, *ibid.*, 196, my emphasis

²³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 294

generation of revolutionary “hope” in this precise sense. However, a certain tendency to theoreticism leads Jameson, in his bid to combine a “negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper” with a “positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses”, to disregard the intricate complexities of the national question which a more “empirical” or even “experiential” analysis (such as the one pursued by Williams) may clarify.²⁴

For Williams, a progressive imaginary of the national requires a non-divisive recognition of common possibility. That is, in other words, a realistic experience of social change endowed with a wealth of particularity and immune to the debilitating abstractions of essentialism. The analysis of Welsh culture as a distinctive formation with a complex history of subordination within the British nation-state is thus to be undertaken, for Williams, at a fundamental remove from any standard or received version of cultural nationalism. For indeed the kind of genealogy which adheres to such dominant “concepts as continuity and essence”,²⁵ far from creating the conditions for a fresh articulation of common possibility, in fact reproduces the operative ideology of the traditional nation-state. This effect of ideological contagion and false projection effectively distorts the actual potentialities and hard-won autonomies carved out within a real position of subordination.

²⁴ Jameson, *ibid.*, 298 In more recent times, Jameson has expanded – and qualified – his analysis of the utopian potentialities of nationalism: “[n]ationalism is at the very least the most dramatic and successful operative paradigm of a great collective project and of collective movements and politics: this is by no means to endorse it as a political idea, but rather a reason to utilize it as an instrument for measuring other collective possibilities.”, Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 226. See also Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: New Left Books, 1977) and Eric Hobsbawm, “Socialism and Nationalism: Some Reflections on ‘The Break-up of Britain’”, in *Politics for a Rational Left* (London: Verso, 1989). For a reading of Raymond Williams in the light of Nairn’s ideas, see Hywel Dix, *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-Up of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008)

²⁵ Raymond Williams, “Wales and England”, in Daniel Williams (ed.), *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture and Identity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 19-20

Williams seeks to subvert the old valences of Welsh nationalism by arresting its dominant pattern of inclusion and its ritual emphasis on continuity of a linguistic-literary kind. Welsh culture, Williams argues, is to be found in a “mixed and uneven process” of constitution in which the ideal and subjectivist versions of resistance to English hegemony – often composed of mythical, resounding names from Aneirin to Dafydd ap Gwylim – are all too frequently overridden, in social history, by a set of “forced and acquired discontinuities”: sharp demographic movements, radical shifts in the productive (and consequently, in the physical) landscape of its regions and convulsive emergences of new social identities derived from the latter. And yet it is in the extreme heterogeneity and unsmooth lineages of this history that a specific singularity, distinct from the “selective, dominant and hegemonic” patterns of an imported English culture, is founded and extended as a native source of alternative social horizons.²⁶

The particular complexity of the Welsh case, as Williams points out, stems from a co-occurrence of often contradictory impulses: a residual – yet at the same time resurgent – attachment to an older, romantic cast of unproblematic national identity; a superimposed and non-exclusive loyalty to the imperial formula of the British state; a specifically Welsh development of Liberalism, Labourism and trade unionism; and even, most significantly, a characteristically oppositional mode of “anti-nationalist nationalism” rooted in the particular accents of an intensely local and yet powerfully universalist tradition of class struggle.²⁷

This cultural archaeology of Wales beyond “Welsh culture” (that is, beyond a stabilised and ideological concept of the nation) brings Williams’ inquiry ever closer, in

²⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 20

²⁷ Williams, *ibid.*, 24

his later years, to the political emphases of a younger generation of Welsh historians, notably represented by Gwyn A. Williams and Dai Smith. Whilst acknowledging the importance and enduring relevance of a specific emphasis on literary-linguistic continuities in Welsh-speaking Wales (as demonstrated in the work of an author like Emyr Humphreys), Williams turns to the emergent identification of a national paradigm which seeks to transcend the restrictive definitions of an allegedly undisrupted and homogeneous tradition. He finds a powerful expression of this fresh problematisation of the nation from within in Dai Smith's work on industrial Wales. It is precisely in the convulsive history of the south-eastern valleys, in the breaks and disruptions of a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous recombination where the defining moment of a specifically Welsh identity (and thus not "Anglicised" in any facile or dismissive sense)²⁸ is to be explored.

The complexity of a human history traversed by population movements, technological intrusions upon the landscape and a broad resultant of institutions and ideologies pulsing at the heart of the nation sits uncomfortably with any univocal narrative of "tradition". This tradition, significantly revived during the interwar years in a recognisably linguistic nationalism (under the strong leadership of figures such as Saunders Lewis), was thus in essential contradiction with the real, unfolding social history of Wales. As Williams points out "[a]gainst all the modern political experience of Wales, this tendency was on the cultural Right then influential throughout Europe. Wales was offered by some as the last noble fragment of a classical and catholic world,

²⁸ The work of writers in this distinctive, English-speaking south Welsh tradition: "Anglicized, at least, it was not. The work of the English-language writers of industrial South Wales is unmistakably indigenous; its English in tone and rhythm is not an English literary style. There seems good justification, in these writers and in the everyday speech of the valleys, for the recent significant assertion, from within what has been the 'nationalist' tendency, that English is a Welsh language." Raymond Williams, "Community", in Daniel Williams (ed.), *ibid.*, 32

Welshness had the function of ‘Englishness’ in Leavis or of ‘timeless’ in Eliot: a stand of old values against a destructive industrial civilization.”²⁹

Against this backward emphasis, still predominant in the context of an increasingly conscious resistance to the centripetal tendencies of the old British nation-state (the “Yookay”), the precise reconstruction of a mainstream history of social change – however diversified and irreducible to a univocal signifier or mythical construct – is essential to any future-oriented socialist agenda, and thus, in Williams’ general orientation vis-à-vis the immediate challenges of 1980s reaction, it supposes an inescapable test of validation for counter-hegemonic strategies of resistance.

In *Wales! Wales?*, a work selected by Williams as the historiographic alternative to the genealogy proposed by Humphreys’ *The Taliesin Tradition*, Dai Smith insists that:

The nation is, as Benedict Anderson recently coined it, an ‘imagined community’. However, people do not all necessarily ‘imagine’ the same community. ‘Public’ definitions may collide with ‘private’ realities in America or even England without serious questioning of national identity, but the ‘imagined community’ applied to Ireland or, in muted fashion, to Wales can become a monolith imposed on or offered to the subjected or blind people. Monoliths are easier for outsiders to recognize, and there is a patronizing kind of sympathy to which small countries like Wales are prey which prefers to accept such an easy answer than hear a babel of voices.³⁰

²⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 29

³⁰ Dai Smith, *Wales! Wales?* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 2; see also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) and Hywel Dix, *ibid.*, esp. 10-16

This differential opening to the national idea and its “resources of hope” is inseparable from Williams’ gradual development of an articulate language of the “local”, of the specific (dis)continuities of culture as expressed through the complex interaction of a people in a particular place.³¹ This fundamental gesture of de-essentialisation requires an evolution of collective imaginaries beyond the static controls of a fixed “landscape”. As Smith points out in relation to the internal subordination, within a hegemonic Welsh nationalism, of industrial – and primarily English-speaking – South Wales to a clichéd and ruralistic projection of the Welsh-speaking North and West: “[e]mpathy with the sea, lakes, mountains and rock strata may serve one kind of purpose but scarcely scratches at the surface of a lived, human history.”³²

In this particular realisation, the conceptual horizon of “the regional” or “the local” transcends the subaltern dimension of a geographical specialisation within the dominant hierarchies of the nation-state. Instead, the region accrues a material specificity endowed with both a particular and a general reference: the first points to the concrete dynamics of a thoroughly articulated society marked out by characteristic traits while the second places it in the context of a wider, systemic process of economic integration. Thus, “the region” appears as both larger and smaller than the essentialist discourse of nationalism would warrant:

³¹ This specific inflection of “the local” in Williams is central to his figuration of “border communities” as “real” bases of hope and alternative imagination. The oppositional quality of his communitarianism is thus inextricable from an experiential immunity to “external ideological definitions, whether divisive or universalist” (see above). In this respect, H. Gustav Klaus has argued that “[Williams’ interest lies] in a place, a single landscape that endures, rather than a particular sociocultural or national formation within it”, “Material grounds: border and place in Raymond Williams’s fiction”, in Dubravka Juraga and M. Keith Booker (eds.), *Socialist Cultures East and West: A Post-Cold War Reassessment* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 128

³² Smith, *ibid.*, 3

These industrial regions and sub-regions of Europe were out of step with the nations in which they were situated. From the Ruhr to Lancashire, from Northern France to North-East England, from the Sambre-Meuse basin to South Wales, they had more in common with each other than they did with their ‘nations’, established or emerging. They were already the future. South Wales, slowly at first and then with increasing momentum, was such a European region in the way North Wales... was not.³³

The distinctive history and social identity of an area like the industrial valleys of South Wales makes its reduction to the abstract generalities of an integrated global market (and its subsidiary agent, the modern nation-state), or to a mythical essence wholly discontinuous with its real processes and collective experience, an obvious resistance to the complex texture of a “whole way of life” seething with alternative and oppositional possibilities.

Williams’ clearest identification of culture (understood in the full sense of a total material process of social production) with the particular history and society of a conflict-ridden and therefore irreducible Wales is to be found in his 1985 novel *Loyalties*.³⁴ The book is organised as a collection of episodes and settings spanning a broad chronology (from the time of the Spanish Civil War to the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5) and charting the interactions and developments of a group of men and women from different social backgrounds: the Cambridge-educated, middle-class Communists Norman and Emma Braose, “Georgi” Wilkes and “Monkey” Pitter, on the one hand, and the working-class Nesta Pritchard and Bert Lewis, on the other.

³³ Smith, *ibid.*, 17

³⁴ The unfinished – and monumental – fictional project of *People of the Black Mountains* should be regarded as a final totalising summation of these developments in Williams’ thought. See Raymond Williams, *People of the Black Mountains, vol. 1: The Beginning* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989) and *People of the Black Mountains, vol. 2: The Eggs of the Eagle* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990). We shall nevertheless restrict our analysis to the particular scope of his last finished novel *Loyalties*.

The notion of loyalty which vertebrates the novel is ultimately determined and mediated by the overarching class divisory and regional specialisation with which the latter is almost confused. Thus the distance – social, geographical and moral – between Bert and Norman is fleshed out in the conjunctures, conflicts and experiences through which their respective meanings and values are formed. The two main different trajectories mapped by the novel – middle-class, “intellectual” Socialism and working-class, “lived” Socialism – are systematically filtered through the contrastive patterns of commitment espoused by the two sets of characters. The middle-class evolution is epitomised, to a degree of variation, by the strict yet still purely abstract orthodoxy of Emma and by the shifting and highly suspect Communism embraced by Norman. The latter emerges, over the decades, as an accommodating kind of socialist, adjusting to the changes imposed by historical “necessity” and opportunity (including a stint as a nuclear spy for the Soviet Union) and finally betraying the cause in an affirmative resumption of ruling class identity and loyalty. Emma, for her part, reproduces the purity of party discipline and subservience to a nominal class and its vanguard organisation (the Communist Party) whilst remaining within the material bounds of her social background and maintaining its general outlook on the working class itself.

Emma’s brand of loyalty is thus of a reliable, continuous and predictable kind and it is, in that sense, more recognisable and sincere in its simplicity. However, its exteriority, its lack of lived definition and real grounding in a tangible social space brands it, in the eyes of the actual working class of the novel, as fundamentally specious and void. As Nesta critically remarks, apropos of Emma’s visits to Danycapel and her insistent hypostatising of the proletarian condition: “[t]hat’s all we get, whenever she

comes here. How we're the real life. How we really understand things. How much stronger she feels when she's been here."³⁵

The sources of commitment and attachment in Danycapel and its social world seem to flow in a different direction. Beginning with the experience of the Spanish Civil War, Bert Lewis encounters a living definition of the kind of loyalty which will guide his steps to the very end. For the working miner, fighting fascism and political commitment generally are not theoretical exercises in detachment but first and foremost, a pulsating actuality, an immediacy of experience: "[w]hat I've found is what *comrade* means. I would never have believed it. It's here on the ground, a real movement, not of strangers but of comrades."³⁶ This fundamental logic of attachment is carried on to the battlefields of France during the Second World War – where he is badly wounded and permanently disfigured – and further into a long continuous series of struggles and setbacks from which no impersonal distance or temporary respite can be gained. Bert's Communism – unlike Emma's or Norman's – is found in solution, in an integral sense of life pledged to the cause of his class and lived within its horizon.³⁷ One of the most representative expressions of this version of loyalty is his response to the nationalisation of the coal industry by the Labour government. Far from registering critical distance from the reformist agenda of the government, he remains adamant in his determination to recognise Vesting Day as a genuine watershed, a collective acknowledgement, as he puts it, that "[t]his has been our bloody war and now it'll be our bloody peace."³⁸

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Loyalties* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1989 [1985]), 247

³⁶ Williams, *ibid.*, 56

³⁷ It may be productive to recall at this point one of the definitions of "structure of feeling" offered in *Marxism and Literature*, which we reviewed above: "[f]or structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available", Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134. Isn't perhaps Bert Lewis' brand of Socialism, his espousal and understanding of a "whole way of life" marked by militancy and collective experience, the ultimate expression of a "structure of feeling"?

³⁸ Williams, *ibid.*, 117

In its representation of this older generation of militants, the novel builds a contrast between working-class sensibility, in which the Communist idea remains a “cultural” fact in the sense of a whole attachment to a particular social identity, and the middle-class interpretation according to which orthodoxy (or unorthodoxy) is a matter of conceptual (and often conjectural) projection. This nodal divergence is dialecticised by a younger generation – especially by Gwyn, Nesta and Norman’s natural son and Bert’s adopted son – who must wrest from the lived complexity of a mixed inheritance the patterns and the values underpinning the notion of commitment and, by extension, the real meaning of loyalty.

Gwyn’s conscious embrace of his “border” identity coincides with the last temporal conjuncture charted by the novel, 1984. After Bert’s death, Gwyn decides to confront his biological father, Norman, and thereby work through the complexities of his own filiation. This peculiar “homecoming” clearly departs from and complexifies the liminal habitation of Matthew Price’s return to Glynmawr and to an original “history” of relatively stable alliances and notions of belonging in *Border Country*. The country-house world of the bourgeois Braoses contrasts sharply – and even bitterly, for Gwyn – with the lived notions and values defined through the closely-knit experience of mutuality adumbrated by his real background in the mining valleys. Gwyn’s exilic identity is, like Matthew Price’s, forged in the scripted leave-taking of a particular kind of upward mobility whose middle stations – in a dynamic which deeply concerned Williams throughout his own life-time – included university training and a different kind of social position from the one enjoyed in childhood. Yet unlike Matthew’s linear, if blurry and irreducibly complex, “journey”, Gwyn’s self-positing in the problematical network of loyalties which traverse his biography *requires* a middle passage through that urban, middle-class and “enlightened” identity in order to expose its betrayals and

ultimately settle for a moral identification with a more distant, if native, world of solid and genuinely alternative solidarities.

Gwyn's conscious disavowal of this external background of ideological redefinitions and personal opportunisms reaches a climax in the dramatic exchange with Norman. Thus the *essence* of the latter's betrayal does not lie in the conservative reorientation of his later politics, or in his covert actions as a Comintern agent in Spain, or even in the personal betrayal of trust dealt to Nesta and Gwyn himself (when, before Gwyn's birth, he chooses with Party encouragement to abandon Nesta and her world), but in the precise and extensive cooptation to which Norman and his "people" subjected Gwyn's: "[y]our special betrayal was that you involved and damaged the only substance, the only hope of our people. You involved and damaged socialism: our own kind of hope but converted by people like you to a distant and arbitrary and alien power."³⁹

Gwyn's loyalty is ultimately stabilised in this recognition of a particular projection of possibility whose very exteriority and living opposition to the abstract and colonising definitions and constructions of an alien society makes it enduring and hopeful in the face of desertions and accommodations: "[a]ny real socialism depends on an actual society. I grew up in such a society, under pressure and hardship but still with its own bonds, its own loyalties. And then no authentic act for socialism can distance itself, let alone hide, from these ties of its own people."⁴⁰ Contextual confirmation of this *authenticity* is provided (in a way that "1926" had done for *Border Country*) in the

³⁹ Williams, *ibid.*, 359

⁴⁰ Williams, *ibid.*, 358

experience of the Miners' Strike – in which the whole community of Danycapel, including Gwyn's mother, Nesta and his brother Dic, are involved –.⁴¹

The imagination of possibility capitalises here – as elsewhere, practically everywhere, as we have seen, in Williams – on the logic of a lived social identity defined in and through the particular struggles of an experiential history. “The real grounds of hope” are in this sense inseparable from the logic of community and from the integral – and integrative – conception of culture as a “whole way of life”. This imaginative productivity, which can be related to what Fredric Jameson has dubbed “the desire called utopia”, is the precise location of Williams' “resources of hope”. Ultimately, as Jameson himself had noted in the early Eighties, the “practice of possibility” involved in a socialist re-mapping of culture and society is inextricable from the projection of a *common* future inflected in *collective* terms.

The experiential grounding of this future in empirical, immediately personal terms is a shared trait, as we have seen, of three distinctive modes of utopian praxis. For all the particular differences of emphasis and programme, Orwell, Thompson and Williams converge upon the term “Socialism” as a concrete figural outlet for this “desire”. The moral and – often emphatically – humanist idiom of their respective strategies (in shorthand: egalitarianism, antinomianism, communalism) projects a plural,

⁴¹ An examination of the politics of the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-85 exceeds the limits of this inquiry. It is worth noting, however, that the particular experience of the Strike as lived in the Welsh Valleys constituted one of Williams' most enduring case-scenarios of the socialist imagination of possibility in his later years. See, for example, Raymond Williams, “Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners' Strike”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *ibid.*, 120-127; for the general impact of the strike on Wales, see Hywel Francis, *History on our Side: Wales and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike* (Ferry-side: Iconau, 2009). See also, Huw Beynon (ed.), *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners' Strike* (London: Verso, 1985); Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: the Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London: Constable, 2009)

open and ultimately unresolved horizon of emancipatory realisation which may nevertheless be coordinated under the unitary notation of “possibility”.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Williams' critical project of the 1970s and 80s capitalises in a very direct way on the resources of hope provided by a particular engagement with history – by a native and yet post-essentialist sense of conjuncture: an integrative and multiple balancing of class, regional and personal loyalties whose point of convergence (whose mode of totalisation) is a permanent, processual and open inscription of change in the “border” zones of social experience. The irreducibility of lived history, combined with the acute awareness of possibility (of systemic, revolutionary, utopian change) provides a fundamental dimension of continuity: beyond formal or “abstract” resemblances in programmatic outline, the cultures of possibility rehearsed by Orwell, Thompson and Williams share a heightened sense of commitment, in the words of Stuart Hall, “to the specificity of a historical conjuncture: how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain on which a different politics must form up.”¹

Thus the adaptability of hope must be constructed through the specific resources of particular moments and experiences, giving rise to a diversified idiom of resistance. In Williams, for example, we have seen that the logic of “a common culture”, qua diagrammatic inscription of an alternative social imagination, takes on – at a certain point in time – the concrete expression of an engagement with the nation or “the national”. In this particular modulation, the construction of a “practical social identity”,

¹ Stuart Hall, “Gramsci and Us”, in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 163

that is, the processual and experientially given articulation of life in common, reaches beyond the abstract temporality of the nation-state, grounding its communicative logic in lived relationships and alliances. The moral topography of the border (the border between industrial and rural society, between working-class and intellectual exile, between languages and cultural traditions, etc) thus becomes constitutive of an alternative space of the national in which external definitions and hierarchies (the normative categories of “Euro-modernity”) are replaced by partial totalities, *whole ways of life* whose proper area of applicability, on account of their position within the hegemonic formation, is the resistant margin.²

Yet the crucial recognition which pulsates throughout Williams’ reflection on alternative forms and experiences of social imagination is the fact of internal coherence which animates these totalities. The exemplarity of the Welsh border lies precisely in the resilient continuities which, for all the fragmentation and practical limitations of their historical achievements, relentlessly inform their sense of belonging and identity. Culture transacts, in the context of these inquiries, as a radical hypothesis of integration rather than as a stabilised or inherited model. A basic continuity can be traced between Williams’ identification of culture as an “ordinary” process inscribed within the unspecialised wealth of concrete social arrangements (“[t]he making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment, under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing

² Lawrence Grossberg’s call for “new ways to connect to the multiplicity not only of disabling and pessimistic realities, but also of hopes, dreams and desires” speaks directly to Williams’ insistence on “border” alternatives to hegemonic categories and definitions. This call is nevertheless compromised by a simplistic characterisation of “Euro-modernity” which does not allow for the wealth of concrete and vitally “hopeful” social identities with which Williams is concerned. Thus, in a very precise sense, the latter’s political project contradicts Grossberg’s claim that “in Euro-modernity, history takes place in the space of the nation state.” Lawrence Grossberg, “Raymond Williams and the absent modernity”, in Monika Seidl, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *About Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 2010), 27, 32-33

themselves into the land”)³ and his later definition of a “hegemonic” totality traversed by dominant, emergent and residual forces. In both formulations, despite the intervening gaps and transitions in emphasis and epistemology, a common appraisal of the wealth and complexity of “unauthorised” or resistant expressions can be detected. The model of hegemony allows, as we have seen, for a more systematic and exhaustive analysis of the precise distribution and significance of oppositional dynamics within the totality of a whole social configuration. In that sense, the total effect of Williams’ interrogation (and his fiction often brings this to a boiling-point) can be described as a detailed acknowledgement of the irreducible multiplicity of historical eventuation as constituted in a permanent and unresolved interaction between power formations and their alternatives.⁴

Towards the end of his life, Williams remarked apropos of Modernism and the bleak prospects of a post-modern exile from History in this particular, lived, sense, that:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.⁵

It is precisely in the recognition and *substantial* engagement with these often relegated, marginal or “border” expressions and articulations (that is, as his fiction often proposes,

³ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary”, in Robin Gable (ed.), *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), 4

⁴ His last project, *People of the Black Mountains* can be read, precisely, as a vital engagement with this irreducible complexity of History *in solution*.

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007 [1989]), 35

in the internal processing and inhabiting of particular structures of feeling, of fully-fledged spaces of collective life) that access to this common future may be gained.

For Williams, the role of cultural inquiry remained embedded in this configuration of social experience as a matrix of alternatives and possibilities. In other words, the “turn” to culture implied an immersion without preconditions in the substance of social production beyond the organising (epistemic) violence of hierarchies and privileged spheres. The proposal of cultural materialism (as evolved from the more intuitive yet concomitant idiom of his earlier work) thus stated the need of positing a complex whole and of identifying prevalences, exertions, and continuities, but also contradictions, antagonisms and alternatives. In this precise sense, cultural inquiry entailed “cultural revolution”, or in other words, the radical politicisation of collective experience from *within*:

Thus a cultural revolution, by contrast with other social programmes, is directed towards the general appropriation of all the real forces of production, including now especially the intellectual forces of knowledge and conscious decision, as the necessary means of revolutionizing the social relations (determination of the use of resources; distribution and organization of work; distribution of products and services) which follow from variable forms of control and of access to all the productive forces... The principle of cultural revolution offers an outline of ways in which there can be both effective association and new forms of negotiation beyond specific associations. In this **assertion of possibility**, against all the

learned habits of resignation and skepticism, it is already **a definition of practical hope**.⁶

It is perhaps in the emphasis on disenfranchised traditions of various kinds and the insistence on their totalising vocation (their prefiguration of an alternative life-world) that Williams' comes closest to Thompson's idiom. The latter's analysis of the formative "moment" of the English working class, for example, represents a particular instantiation of an alternative imagination which a canonical (hegemonic) projection of modernity has tended to suppress. The internal reconstruction of the "voice" of that alternative dramatises the complexity of a conjuncture admittedly nourished by defeats and limitations, but also composed of tangible scenarios of "practical hope".

For Thompson, it has been argued, the experience of politics is indefatigably informed by a notion of complexity which no doctrinal or theoretical stabilisation can possibly circumvent. This complexity is typically articulated in the recognition of process and relationship as the dynamic constituents of historical formations. Thompson's conception of class is paradigmatic: class is "a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure".⁷ It is only by extricating the "form" from its processual milieu – from its lived reality – that a neat structuralist concept can be obtained, and this, at the expense of historical causality and eventuation.

Thompson's assault on Althusserian theory follows from the political corollary of his epistemology. For the reduction of historical complexity to a set of intellectually generated assumptions is ultimately indistinct from the Stalinist tendency to control and "centralise" the multiplicity of voices which animate the historic struggles of the

⁶ Raymond Williams, "Beyond Actually Existing Socialism", in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 257, 272

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1963]), 8

working class. The marked strands of “idealism” in theory thus replicate, for Thompson, the debilitating instincts of a bureaucratic monolith against which “1956” had defined itself. Thompson’s historical work is, as we have insisted, radically involved in this biographically-motivated attempt at political redefinition. The “socialist humanist” project originating in the Hungarian crisis was thus ultimately concerned with the articulation of a resistant space within Marxism – a space of oppositionality whose figures and models were often derived from an idiosyncratic genealogy of English antinomianism.

Thompson’s deployment of History is fundamentally mediated by an overarching notion of “experience” which places his work in direct conversation with that of Williams. This central category has been systematically berated from structuralist and post-structuralist quarters for its alleged incapacity to function critically, outside the confines of ideology. Thus, it has been argued “that any attempt to grasp experience without closely attending to language is an illusion founded on the conception of experience as a self-authenticating truth.”⁸ In other words, without a careful dissection of the structured nature of experiential discourses, historical scrutiny is in danger of succumbing to self-validating (and hence, ideological) truth-claims. This important debate in cultural theory should not distract us, however, from the political effectivity of attempting a reconstruction of subordinated voices under conditions of hegemony. As Michael Pickering has argued (in an emphasis which resonates with Thompson’s work):

What has also to be insisted upon is the importance of listening attentively to those voices, in whatever ways it is possible to ‘recover’ them, not because they themselves are more true than dominant subject-positions, but

⁸ Michael Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 211

because they have the right to be heard, and heard where possible in their own words. More significantly, we need to listen to such voices because they sometimes speak against the grain of subject-positions assigned from ‘outside’, because they are then in some way resistant to the dominant definition of those subject-positions, and strain against the power-lines that run through identity and experience.⁹

It is by excavating the tonalities and native accents of these relegated subjects (and their “neglected works”, according to Williams) that an alternative future may be construed – that a collective hope may be imagined.

Orwell’s importance is clarified in the light of this experiential understanding of History. Often disavowed by the New Left (not least by Thompson and Williams), what Orwell offers is, nevertheless, a benchmark of practical experience against which hopes and possibilities of a collective future may be measured. In a way that 1956 would do for Thompson, and 1926 – at least partially, among other “moments” – for Williams, 1936 and the Spanish Civil War would articulate for Orwell a horizon of collective deliverance mediated by the troubled disposition of forces and antagonisms within the Left. In Orwell, the political topography of the 1930s is complexified by an internal rift between centralising and dissident definitions of the collectivist project. The denunciation of Soviet totalitarianism introduces an enabling criterion of “authenticity” with which both Thompson and Williams’ emancipatory visions will be aligned. The logic of equality which presides over Orwell’s works thus inscribes the problematic of possibility (the hopeful generation of alternative social horizons) as a bid for self-definition.

⁹ Pickering, *ibid.*, 212

The idea of Socialism which transpires from a contextual reading of Orwell, Thompson and Williams, refers us to a concept of social transformation or utopia rooted in the experiential version of History. The latter is, in that sense, irreducible to an external definition of possibility, to a finalised construct or projection without organic links to lived processes and relations.

The narratives of hope which different conjunctures tell are in each case, as we have seen, inseparable from the complex dialectic of oppression and resistance. Neither pole is reducible to the other. And yet this ongoing, precarious equilibrium – this “border” zone inhabited by the logic of possibility – is enduringly committed to the compelling imagination of an emancipated human world.

RESUMEN Y CONCLUSIONES EN ESPAÑOL

Resumen

Esta tesis doctoral propone una lectura comparativa de tres proyectos de imaginación social transformadora situados cronológicamente entre la década de 1930 y la consolidación del Thatcherismo. Mi objetivo fundamental es la reconstrucción de aquellos elementos comunes que dan sentido y coherencia ideológica al concepto de “socialismo” como matriz discursiva generadora de lógicas e imaginarios sociales alternativos en el contexto de la obra de George Orwell, Edward Thompson y Raymond Williams.

La adscripción de estos tres autores a una idea anti-determinista de alternativas y posibilidades emancipatorias y oposicionales, así como su especial sensibilidad hacia los conceptos de “experiencia” y “agencialidad”, los convierte en un punto de partida ideal para el estudio del proyecto político y cultural de la izquierda británica en su encarnación anti-autoritaria desde la Gran Depresión hasta el final de la Guerra Fría.

Se pretende demostrar, dentro del espectro intelectual de dicha izquierda británica, la especial afinidad (y aun consecutividad) de los proyectos intelectuales de Orwell, Thompson y Williams, como tres “momentos” secuenciales en el desarrollo de esta tradición política y cultural. El peculiar entramado discursivo que encontramos en estos autores presupone una conceptualización amplia del término “política”, extendiéndose a través de una red compleja de prácticas textuales que van desde la ficción a la crítica y la teoría, pasando por la historiografía y el periodismo. Esta tarea comparativa plantea por tanto un esfuerzo interdisciplinar que trasciende la identidad

canónica de cada autor (como novelista, historiador o crítico) con el fin de rescatar su especificidad histórica dentro de una genealogía política concreta.

Este recorrido comienza con un análisis de la evolución política de George Orwell, tomando como referencias contextuales básicas: a) la coyuntura inicial que desencadena su adscripción socialista a mediados de los años treinta (la “experiencia” de la Gran Depresión en el Norte de Inglaterra), b) su paso por España durante la Guerra Civil y subsiguiente decantación por la opción revolucionaria anti-estalinista y c) su posterior adopción de un programa reformista de transformación social radical vinculado a una determinada opción izquierdista dentro del laborismo británico.

The Road to Wigan Pier constituye la primera aproximación significativa por parte de Orwell al ideario socialista. El análisis con el que se abre la primera sección de este trabajo propone por tanto una evaluación tanto del contexto socio-político en el que se inscribe (las condiciones de vida “objetivas” de la clase obrera inglesa, especialmente en el Norte, y el avance del fascismo) como de los elementos subjetivos que conforman la singular “conversión” orwelliana al socialismo. Prestaremos especial atención a los rasgos idiosincrásicos de este momento inicial de definición de su programa o visión de la acción política (un primer momento de “intuiciones”) para luego contrastarlos con la madurez “experiencial” de sus reflexiones revolucionarias en *Homage to Catalonia* y sus escritos de los años 1938-40.

Se tomará en especial consideración el contexto político de la España republicana que conoció Orwell, como fuente de imaginarios concretos de “posibilidad” transformadora, por un lado, y como escenario de limitaciones y coacciones “totalitarias” a dichas formaciones emancipatorias. Se tratará, especialmente, de evaluar en qué medida sus escritos de la época consiguen dotar de contenido e identidad

programática a las observaciones intuitivas y el desiderátum ético de *The Road to Wigan Pier*. El concepto de experiencia al que aludiremos sistemáticamente en nuestra exposición plantea un aspecto crucial en la evolución intelectual de este autor. Así pues, el término socialismo pasa, de ser un mero anclaje significante de nociones “pre-políticas” o al menos fundamentalmente intuitivas (igualdad, justicia, *decency*) en su obra anterior, a funcionar como el contexto discursivo básico de una experiencia de emancipación colectiva.

La constelación ideológica e institucional representada por el estalinismo en sus diversas vertientes supone un paradigma negativo frente al que esta experiencia de movilización revolucionaria queda definida como realización posible del ideal igualitario. En ese sentido, la Guerra Civil Española supone en la obra de Orwell un momento de distinción interna entre una versión mecanicista y dogmática (que Orwell, y posteriormente Thompson, asociarán a la escolástica marxista-leninista) del socialismo y una encarnación vivencial en la cual el principio cooperativo nace de la experiencia y el contacto directos con el proceso de transformación social. Este mismo compromiso con la agencialidad, con la participación activa, lo encontramos en el Orwell de 1940-41, acaso el momento culminante de su fase revolucionaria. Con el comienzo de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, Orwell traslada las dinámicas aprendidas en la milicia del POUM al frente doméstico, vislumbrando en organizaciones paramilitares de tipo voluntario como la *Home Guard* el germen de una potencial fuerza revolucionaria con rasgos propiamente británicos.

El siguiente polo de definición del socialismo orwelliano (lo que hemos dado en llamar su reformismo radical) surge como respuesta específica y por tanto inseparable de la coyuntura histórica desarrollada al término de la Guerra Mundial y la dinámica de bloques a la que dio lugar. Sus obras clásicas de denuncia anti-totalitaria (*Animal Farm*

y *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) suponen un momento de repliegue frente a las esferas de influencia estadounidense y soviética cuyo objeto último es una estrecha identificación con el programa de reformas igualitarias llevado a cabo por el gobierno laborista de 1945.

Las limitaciones y contradicciones internas de esta última fase de la obra de Orwell nacen directamente de una coyuntura histórica (la Guerra Fría) a la que la disidencia comunista británica, especialmente a lo largo de los años 50 (Orwell muere a principios de 1950), trató asimismo de dar respuestas nuevas. 1956 (el año de las “revelaciones” internas en el vigésimo congreso del PCUS y la Revolución Húngara) marca un punto de inflexión en la toma de conciencia del fenómeno estalinista. Dentro del Partido Comunista Británico, el frente de oposición liderado por los historiadores E.P. Thompson y John Saville marca un momento clave de ruptura con la cultura política de la izquierda en el período de entreguerras, articulando una definición de “socialismo humanista” que entronca directamente con el enfoque libertario del Orwell *poumista* y lo desarrolla en nuevas direcciones.

La obra de Thompson representa, por su parte, un amplio abanico de momentos y expresiones disidentes cuyo entramado epistemológico queda estructurado en torno al concepto de experiencia. El paso de Orwell a Thompson supone, con relación a este concepto, un importante avance en términos tanto de aplicación analítica como de sofisticación teórica. En cierto modo, la totalidad de la obra científica (y también no-científica, incluida su breve incursión en el terreno de la ficción) de Thompson plantea una descripción de posibilidades emancipatorias dentro de los parámetros experienciales de las coyunturas estudiadas. Así pues, obras fundamentales de su corpus, como *The Making of the English Working Class*, ofrecen un esfuerzo de legitimación de las realidades vividas por sujetos silenciados en las narrativas dominantes. Su conocida

polémica con Althusser señala un rechazo frontal, desde una posición historiográfica (pero también ética y propiamente política), del rigorismo teórico propio de determinadas versiones de la filosofía marxista. Para Thompson, el esfuerzo de transformación radical connatural a la opción socialista no puede sustraerse (tampoco dentro de la práctica historiográfica) a los procesos subjetivos que en última instancia vehiculan cualquier horizonte de cambio social. La experiencia, por tanto, constituye la potencia emancipadora del socialismo y como tal es irreductible (aunque no ajena) a cualquier “objetividad” histórica.

La fundamentación subjetivista que encontramos en Thompson adquiere, en la obra de Williams, los contornos precisos de una formulación flexible, adaptable a contextos en permanente evolución y, finalmente, abierta. Los términos “cultura” y “comunidad” aparecen en su obra temprana con una doble proyección: por un lado, constituyen el vocabulario básico de su marco analítico y por otro, remiten constantemente a un *hinterland* experiencial propio. La obra de Williams es especialmente interesante puesto que marca, dentro del linaje intelectual de la izquierda británica (y en especial, de la llamada Nueva Izquierda o *New Left*), una síntesis avanzada de biografismo y formalización. Así pues, el concepto de cultura desarrollado por Williams en su célebre *Culture and Society* está directamente enraizado en la experiencia personal de la frontera entre Gales e Inglaterra, pero también de la “frontera” entre una identidad de clase forjada en las luchas históricas del proletariado británico (como la Huelga General de 1926) y un exilio intelectual y social dentro del *establishment* académico inglés. La noción de comunidad es, en este contexto, un ámbito de proyección interpersonal insoslayable, un elemento de permanencia y continuidad básico. Pero también es un horizonte de posibilidad transformadora ulterior, un programa general derivado de la experiencia concreta.

Nuestra incursión en la obra de Williams toma como punto de partida su importante recorrido arqueo-filológico por el concepto de “cultura” desarrollado en Gran Bretaña como respuesta específica al capitalismo industrial y su proyecto de sociedad. Esta tradición intelectual (representada por nombres como Edmund Burke, William Cobbett, Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold etc.) surge de las transformaciones estructurales de finales del siglo dieciocho y principios del diecinueve, ofreciendo un caudal de significados estéticos y morales cuya función última es contrarrestar la fragmentación social propia del paradigma liberal del *laissez faire*. Williams halla una complementariedad esencial entre esta tradición intelectual a menudo reaccionaria y la experiencia colectiva del naciente proletariado industrial y sus modos específicos de oposición. Frente a una concepción individualista de lo social, la idea de una “cultura común” – cuya génesis está precisamente en la conjunción de estas dos tradiciones – ofrece un futuro cooperativo de creación a salvo de los procesos de reificación y atomización imperantes en la sociedad capitalista.

Para el Williams de *The Long Revolution* este proceso emancipatorio parte de una voluntad alterizadora fundamental: la transformación social efectiva radica en la *creación* de significados diferentes, en la producción de descripciones nuevas y en el desarrollo de nuevas fórmulas de comunicación interpersonal (frente a las tendencias limitativas de la “sociedad de masas”). A lo largo de los años setenta, el pensamiento de Williams experimenta una cierta convergencia con la tradición marxista continental (especialmente, con la obra de Lucien Goldmann, Georg Lukàcs y Antonio Gramsci) que le permite desarrollar un nuevo marco teórico y analítico con el que abordar el concepto de cultura y su ámbito de referencia tal y como quedan definidos en las obras anteriores.

Los últimos trabajos de Williams ofrecen un momento de síntesis entre su concepción inicial de la cultura como un proceso complejo y “ordinario” dotado de una densidad cotidiana, enteramente social y por tanto no restringida a una determinada esfera de producción intelectual, y un paradigma más formalizado e incisivo de análisis en el que los elementos básicos de crítica y proyección política anteriormente estudiados alcanzan una nueva formulación adaptada a los desafíos de la posmodernidad.

Conclusiones

Los proyectos emancipatorios articulados por Orwell, Thompson y Williams prestan especial atención a los recursos específicos de momentos y experiencias particulares, de coyunturas históricas concretas, dando lugar a un lenguaje plural de oposición y resistencia. En Williams, por ejemplo, hemos visto que la lógica de una “cultura común”, en tanto que inscripción diagramática de un imaginario social alternativo, adopta – en un momento determinado – la expresión concreta del discurso nacional. En esta modulación particular, la construcción de una “identidad social práctica”, es decir, la articulación procesual y experiencial de la vida en común, trasciende la temporalidad abstracta del estado-nación y funda su lógica comunicativa en alianzas y relaciones vividas. La topografía moral de la frontera (la frontera entre la sociedad industrial y la rural, entre el exilio intelectual y la posición de clase, entre lenguas y tradiciones culturales, etc.) es constitutiva de un espacio alternativo de lo nacional en el que las definiciones externas y jerárquicas (las categorías normativas de la “Euro-modernidad”) son sustituidas por totalidades parciales, *modos integrales de vida* cuya área específica de aplicación, en virtud de su posición dentro de la formación hegemónica, es el margen.

La ejemplaridad de la frontera galesa reside precisamente en las continuidades que, más allá de la fragmentación y limitaciones prácticas de su devenir histórico, forman su sentido de pertenencia e identidad. La cultura se manifiesta, en este contexto, como una hipótesis radical de integración más que como un modelo estable y heredado. Así pues, se puede trazar una línea continua entre la identificación que hace Williams de

la cultura como proceso “ordinario” inscrito en una pluralidad de circunstancias sociales (“la formación de una sociedad es el hallazgo de significados y direcciones comunes, y su crecimiento es un debate y modificación continuos, bajo la presión de la experiencia, el contacto, y el descubrimiento, grabándose en la tierra”)¹ y su definición posterior de una totalidad “hegemónica” atravesada por fuerzas dominantes, emergentes y residuales. En ambas formulaciones, y a pesar de la distancia en cuanto a enfoque y epistemología, se puede detectar una apreciación compartida de la riqueza y complejidad que caracteriza a dichas expresiones culturales. El concepto de hegemonía permite, como hemos visto, un análisis más sistemático y exhaustivo de la distribución y significado precisos de las dinámicas oposicionales dentro de la configuración social. En ese sentido, el efecto total de la obra de Williams (y su obra de ficción lo pone especialmente de manifiesto) se puede describir como un reconocimiento detallado de la irreductible multiplicidad del devenir histórico entendido como interacción permanente – y no resuelta – entre las formaciones de poder y sus alternativas.

Hacia el final de su vida, Williams comentaba a propósito del modernismo y de las sombrías perspectivas de un exilio posmoderno fuera del devenir histórico en este sentido experiencial, que:

Si hemos de romper con la fijeza anhistórica del *post*-modernismo, entonces debemos buscar y contraponer una tradición alternativa tomada de las obras olvidadas y abandonadas en el ancho margen del siglo, una tradición que se pueda dirigir no ya a esta reescritura explotable – en tanto que inhumana –

¹ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary”, en Robin Gable (ed.), *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), 4

del pasado, sino, por todos nosotros, a un *futuro* moderno en el que la comunidad pueda ser imaginada de nuevo.²

Es precisamente mediante el reconocimiento y estudio *sustancial* de estas expresiones y articulaciones a menudo relegadas, marginales o “fronterizas” (tal y como propone su ficción, mediante un procesamiento interno de “estructuras de sentimiento”, de espacios desarrollados de vida colectiva) como se puede acceder al imaginario viable de un futuro en común.

Para Williams, la tarea de la investigación cultural permanece unida a dicha configuración de la experiencia social como una matriz de alternativas y posibilidades. En otras palabras, el “giro” cultural supone una inmersión sin precondiciones en la sustancia de la producción social al margen de jerarquías organizativas y otras formas de violencia epistémica. La propuesta del materialismo cultural (según queda definida en la evolución de su obra) afirma por tanto la necesidad de postular un todo complejo y de identificar, en su seno, prevalencias, esfuerzos y continuidades, pero también contradicciones, antagonismos y alternativas. En este sentido preciso, el análisis cultural conlleva una “revolución cultural”, o en otras palabras, una politización radical de la experiencia colectiva:

Así pues, una revolución cultural, a diferencia de otros programas sociales, va dirigida a la apropiación general de todas las fuerzas reales de producción, incluyendo ahora especialmente las fuerzas intelectuales del conocimiento y la decisión consciente, como el medio necesario de revolucionar las relaciones sociales (determinación del uso de los recursos; distribución y organización del trabajo; distribución de productos y

² Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007 [1989]), 35

servicios) que surgen de las formas variables de control y de acceso a todas las fuerzas productivas... El principio de revolución cultural ofrece un esquema de modos en los que se puede dar asociación efectiva y nuevas formas de negociación más allá de asociaciones específicas. En esta **afirmación de posibilidad**, contra todos los hábitos adquiridos de resignación y escepticismo, [la revolución cultural] es ya en sí **una definición de esperanza práctica**.³

El punto en el que el enfoque de Williams se acerca más al de Thompson es precisamente este especial interés por las tradiciones silenciadas y lo que ambos autores caracterizan como su vocación totalizadora. El análisis que hace Thompson del momento formativo de la clase obrera inglesa, por ejemplo, representa la encarnación particular de una imaginación alternativa de lo social que la proyección canónica (hegemónica) de la modernidad tiende a suprimir. La reconstrucción interna de la “voz” de dicha formación alternativa escenifica las complejidades de una coyuntura nutrida ciertamente de derrotas y limitaciones, pero también de escenarios tangibles de “esperanza práctica”.

Para Thompson, según hemos observado, la experiencia de lo político viene articulada por una noción de complejidad que ningún intento de estabilización teórica o doctrinal puede eludir. Esta complejidad queda plasmada en el reconocimiento de procesos y relaciones en tanto que elementos constituyentes de las formaciones históricas. La concepción thompsoniana de clase es paradigmática: la clase es “una fluidez que evade todo análisis si tratamos de fijarla en un momento determinado y de

³ Raymond Williams, “Beyond Actually Existing Socialism”, in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 257, 272

anatomizar su estructura”.⁴ Sólo se podría obtener un nítido concepto estructuralista mediante esta sustracción de la “forma” a su medio procesual, a su realidad vivida: y esto únicamente a costa de la causalidad y el devenir históricos.

El ataque que lanza Thompson contra la teoría althusseriana nace del corolario político de su propia epistemología. La reducción de esa complejidad procesual del acontecer histórico a una serie de premisas formales es, en última instancia, indistinguible de la tendencia estalinista a controlar y “centralizar” las múltiples voces que inspiraron y animaron la lucha de la clase obrera. La marcada tendencia “idealista” de este linaje teórico reproduce, según Thompson, los instintos burocráticos frente a los cuales la coyuntura oposicional de 1956 quedó definida. La obra histórica de Thompson es, tal y como hemos insistido, inseparable de sus esfuerzos biográficos por ofrecer una redefinición política. El proyecto del “humanismo socialista” que surge de la crisis húngara viene marcado por un intento de articulación de espacios de resistencia internos a la tradición marxista; espacios de oposición cuyas figuras y modelos provienen a menudo de otra tradición idiosincrásica, radical, inglesa y antinómica.

El despliegue que hace Thompson del concepto “historia” viene mediado por la noción de “experiencia”, que sitúa su obra en conversación directa con la de Williams. Esta categoría central ha sido criticada sistemáticamente desde ámbitos estructuralistas y post-estructuralistas, por su supuesta incapacidad para escapar a los dictados de la ideología. Así pues, se ha argumentado “que cualquier intento por captar la experiencia sin atender escrupulosamente al lenguaje es una ilusión fundada en una concepción de la experiencia como verdad auto-autentificadora.”⁵ En otras palabras, sin una disección cuidadosa de la naturaleza estructurada de los discursos experienciales, el análisis

⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1963]), 8

⁵ Michael Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 211

histórico corre el riesgo de sucumbir a los reflejos lingüísticos del poder. Este importante debate en el ámbito de la teoría cultural no debería distraernos, sin embargo, de la tarea de rescatar y reconstruir aquellas voces subordinadas bajo condiciones hegemónicas. En palabras de Michael Pickering:

En lo que también se ha de insistir es en la importancia de escuchar atentamente aquellas voces, de “recuperarlas” en la medida en que sea posible, no porque sean en sí más verdaderas que las posiciones dominantes, sino porque tienen derecho a ser oídas, y oídas si es posible en sus propias palabras. Más aún, necesitamos escuchar tales voces porque a veces hablan en contra de posiciones que han sido asignadas desde “fuera”, porque en cierto modo se oponen a la definición dominante de dichas posiciones y presionan contra las líneas de poder que recorren la identidad y la experiencia.⁶

Es en la exploración de estos acentos y matices de los sujetos relegados (y de sus “obras olvidadas”, según Williams) donde se puede alcanzar un futuro alternativo, donde se puede imaginar una esperanza colectiva.

La importancia de Orwell queda de manifiesto a la luz de este modo “experiencial” de comprensión histórica. A menudo excomulgado por la Nueva Izquierda (también por Thompson y Williams), Orwell ofrece sin embargo un patrón de experiencia práctica que permite medir las esperanzas y posibilidades colectivas de una determinada coyuntura histórica. Del mismo modo que 1956 representa un punto de inflexión radical para Thompson, o que 1926, entre otros “momentos”, supone un polo retrospectivo fundamental para Williams, 1936 y la Guerra Civil Española habría de

⁶ Pickering, *ibid.*, 212

articular para Orwell un horizonte de liberación colectiva mediado y condicionado por la compleja disposición de fuerzas y antagonismos en el seno de la izquierda. En Orwell, la topografía política de los años treinta viene marcada por una cesura interna entre definiciones centralizadoras y disidentes del proyecto emancipatorio. La denuncia del totalitarismo de raíz soviética introduce un criterio de “autenticidad” que queda alineado con las concepciones humanistas y comunitarias de Thompson y Williams. La lógica igualitaria que preside el corpus orwelliano inscribe por tanto la problemática de la posibilidad (la generación esperanzada de horizontes sociales alternativos) como una apuesta por la autodefinición.

La idea de socialismo que emana de una lectura contextual de Orwell, Thompson y Williams, nos remite por tanto a una concepción de la transformación social (de la utopía, incluso) arraigada en la versión experiencial de la Historia. Esta última es, en ese sentido, irreductible a una definición externa de la posibilidad, a un constructo o proyección acabados sin vínculos orgánicos con los procesos y relaciones vividos.

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